OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

by

C. NINA BOYLE

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BY

C. NINA BOYLE

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1923

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TO
THEA AND IRENE
WHOSE LIVES HAVE LAIN IN SHELTERED WAYS

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OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT QUEST

MAISIE sat at the window, staring out into the garden with a brooding expression.

Maisie had been at Mrs. Stutchberry's High-class Educational Establishment for Young Gentlewomen for more years than she could remember. The time had passed uneventfully. Her first holidays had been spent in the empty schoolhouse (coffined in brown holland), under the chaperonage of Cook. At some later period she had been claimed by her mother—the only parent of whom she had any recollection—and taken to a boarding-house in Brittany. The summer following, by arrangement, was spent with Mrs. Stutchberry at Llanvairfechan. And the successive holidays after that, at the school; with illusory suggestions (which never fructified) of joining an elusive mamma at various delectable resorts, to cheer her on the way like the bunch of carrots dangled in front of a donkey's nose. When other girls went to the homes of which they brought back seductive tales, Maisie, by no means envious or unhappy, wandered about the deserted garden and play-ground, climbed forbidden trees, stuffed herself with undreamed-of quantities of fruit and visited thrilling localities with Cook. Or—in winter—lay on her stomach on the hearthrug before the small dining-room fire and devoured assorted works of fiction with an abnormal appetite.

There was a good supply of light literature in that smaller dining-room. Old bound *Cornhills* and *Temple Bars, All the Year Rounds* and *Good Words;* Dickens, Thackeray, Jane Austen, the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, Fielding, Smollett, Scott, Charles Reade, and Anthony Trollope. And there were poets, and dear disreputable Pepys, and Greville's scurrilous Memoirs, and Goldsmith, and Molière, and a host of others. This incongruous *macédoine* of drama, fiction and reminiscence had given Maisie a world of her own, unexplored by Mrs. or Miss Stutchberry, whose conventional souls would not only have been scandalized by such catholicity of knowledge, but would also have been confounded at their own short-sightedness in leaving the way open for it.

Maisie was nearly seventeen, and showed signs of good looks. She moved and held herself well, and was dowered with an air of distinction which marked her out from her schoolmates. She had beautiful hands and feet, and a way of using them that made other girls look clumsy.

Maisie remembered her mother as a smart monopolizing person who had represented herself to her daughter, on that brief holiday occasion that was becoming so hazy a memory, as endowed with an embarrassing superfluity of attractiveness. It had, apparently, caused a world of unpleasantness, and had some association with the fascinating parent's habit of alluding to other ladies as cats. She was also the possessor of some attribute that enabled her to boast of always being able to "keep things alive," and make them "go with a rattle." Maisie was sometimes a little overcome, a little dizzy, with the rattle. It was so very rattling. But that was because Maisie was a stupid. Mamma said so; said so rather frequently. She would have to wake up, or she would find herself in the cart—a position Maisie vaguely felt that she would be deeply ashamed of. Distance lent a continually growing enchantment to the rattling parent's personality; and Maisie

figured her as an irresistible leader of fashion and centre of romance, such as she read of in the works surreptitiously devoured on the hearthrug in the winter holidays.

The High-class Educational Establishment was conducted by Mrs. Stutchberry, aided by the strong mind and personality of Miss Stutchberry, her sister-in-law. This lady, while less erudite than her partner, was unmatched in her own department, literature and languages. The Young Gentlewomen learned to talk foreign tongues with a reliable accent and their own with no accent at all, and without vulgarities or affectations; and they acquired a sound all-round acquaintance with the thoughts and works of modern European writers. Miss Stutchberry had the knack of making her subjects live; and she also inculcated not only a high brand of principle and purpose, but a sound standard of sense in methods of living. It really was a High-class Educational Establishment.

Mrs. Stutchberry instructed the Young Gentlewomen in needlework and deportment as well as the classics; and professors and lecturers who came at stated intervals devoted themselves to other necessary matters.

The two ladies made a point of dropping the "in-law" and alluding to their relationship as sisters. They also were in the habit of holding up their own attachment to each other as a species of beautiful but almost unattainable ideal—for others. There was "a bond" between them to which allusion was frequently made, with an obviously unreal pretence of avoiding sentimentality. The bond was shamelessly exploited for the quelling of unimpressionable parents; and was a matter for incessant ribald comment and jest among the Young Gentlewomen.

The number of Young Gentlewomen was advertised as "limited." It had always been too limited for the Sisters Stutchberry, who had saved, but not enough.

And now, to add to higher wages, and high prices of

food, and a rent that would surely be raised when the lease ran out next year, and the ever-rising tide of rates and taxes, here was this trouble about Maisie. Maisie's vanishing parent had never been a pleasant topic to dwell upon. She was cold-blooded and unmotherly, at best; but so long as the quarterly payments came regularly, these considerations had been kept, though uneasily, in the background. But it was a year and more since any payment had been made; and when the moment came that the catastrophe could no longer be gainsaid, Mrs. Stutchberry and Miss Stutchberry looked each other in the face over it.

"Suppose she is left on our hands for good?" anxiously queried Mrs. Stutchberry. Miss Stutchberry had already mentally envisaged that possibility.

"Do not let us think of that yet," she answered. "Let us think what it is best to do."

"I do not know what one *can* do, when there is no address, and letters are returned, and we have no clue of any sort. A change of name; and on the Continent; why, she could evade discovery for years. There are a thousand ways in which she could evade it."

"We cannot turn her out," said Miss Stutchberry, alluding to Maisie.

"No," admitted Mrs. Stutchberry, grudgingly. "We cannot turn her out."

Mrs. Stutchberry had a beautiful absence of scruple over small pieces of cheatery and dubious schemes, and elaborately laid webs of hypocrisy. A hard world and its wicked ways drives many a decent soul into such. But she drew the line at anything cruel, or really wrong. It would be wicked to turn poor Maisie out; and besides, it would be unwise. It might get known, and then what things would be said, and rightly said, about Mrs. Stutchberry! No; one could not turn a girl out.

There was the further question, of whether or not to

tell Maisie. And that again was vetoed as unkind; and likewise unwise. She would be sure to make some confidante of her trouble; and the confidante would repeat it at home, or to the other girls; and the parents would get the idea that undesirable persons, certainly not gentlewomen, were in the habit of sending their unwanted daughters to the High-class Educational Establishment. Silence was best.

Mrs. Stutchberry prided herself on the fact, that although the strictest discipline and propriety were the key-notes of her establishment, new ideas were allowed full and free discussion—within the definite limits of being Young Gentlewomen, *bien entendu*. So in the presence of all the scholars, Maisie was addressed, and informed that, with the new ideas now permeating so many circles of society, a wise and beneficent arrangement had been made for her welfare, in case of her desiring some day to embark upon an independent career. It had been decided for her that she was not only to be cultured and accomplished, but useful; and it had been laid upon Mrs. Stutchberry and her dear sister that she was to have a full and complete training in domestic science, besides those other golden gifts of learning and art.

All this had been summed up over night in one brief sentence: "She had better learn to make herself useful;" but to the sisters' credit, Maisie's feelings were in every way spared.

So Maisie got up half-an-hour earlier and was absent from some of the classes. She helped the parlour-maid and took charge of the "dirty clothes." She helped to make beds and learned to estimate for the weekly grocer's and oilman's orders. She mended Mrs. Stutchberry's fine household linen—which was never used for the Young Gentlewomen—and tended the conservatory and kept the house-plants and the table-flowers in order. The other girls laughed and called her Sarah-Jane; but

it was good-humoured fun and Sarah-Jane took it laughingly. She brought to her new tasks a genial temper and that indefinable air of breeding which distinguished all she undertook.

New ideas have roots; they also have branches and seeds. Maisie was rather pleased than otherwise at being the exponent, or the experiment, of a new idea; but it put several other new ideas into her head. One evening, Mrs. Stutchberry had asked the vicar and his wife, and the director of the agricultural college, and the organist and a blind musical genius staying with him, to dinner, and Maisie had been incited to excel herself in table decoration. Seeing the gleaming, delicate result, she had longed with all her heart, in a sudden fit of sentiment, to do her mother's table, for her mother's admiring guests, just like that. Echoes of stories setting forth the glories of that mother's bygone entertainments came back to her memory. (For, everything that mamma had ever recalled, of the days before Maisie's memory began, had been in strains of glories and triumphs.)

Musing thus, Maisie came up against something that had been hovering, nebulous, in her mind for some time past. What a long time it was since her mother had written to her! She had never been anything but a fitful, intermittent correspondent, and had impressed on Maisie that she could not be bothered with incessant letters. "Write to me when I write to you," had been the rule; and the last letter had been . . . oh! *ages* ago. Maisie wondered where she was now; and over her, for the first time, crept a feeling of loneliness and desertion.

The feeling came back vehemently a few days later, when an unusually big post-bag disgorged letters for almost everyone in the school. Maisie not only felt lonely, but injured. New ideas sprang up in a heavy crop. So she sat brooding and staring into the rain through the school-room window, resisting all induce-

ments to join in the romps of the Young Gentlewomen. By and by she left the room, the victim of a stern resolve.

"Come in," called Mrs. Stutchberry in answer to a knock at the door of her sanctum, and Maisie came in.

"Yes?" queried Mrs. Stutchberry, with lifted eyebrow.

"Can you please tell me where my mother is?" said Maisie, standing in her quiet, well-bred way inside the closed door.

Mrs. Stutchberry was so taken aback that she lost control of the situation.

"Where your mother is?" she repeated helplessly, "Where your *mother* is?"

"Yes, please," answered Maisie. "I have not heard from her for . . . oh, it must be nearly a year. Where did she write to you from the other day?"

"Write to me from the other day!" repeated Mrs. Stutchberry, her acumen playing her false.

"When you told us I was to be trained in domestic science," began Maisie; and Mrs. Stutchberry saw the abyss into which she had slipped. "May I have the address?"

"The letter . . . er . . . was not . . . had no . . . er . . . address," said Mrs. Stutchberry, deliberately and guardedly.

"No address!"

"Er . . . no."

"No address! May I see it?"

Maisie had no idea of being impertinent or unbelieving. She was bewildered; and had a kind of idea that if she saw the writing and handled the letter, some clue to the writer's whereabouts might be forthcoming.

Mrs. Stutchberry considered a moment. It was one thing to be kind and to spare the child; it was quite another to tie oneself up in a tangle of lies. Then she got up and said, "Sit down and wait a minute," and left

the room, Maisie taking it for granted that she had gone to fetch the letter.

When Mrs. Stutchberry returned she was accompanied by Miss Stutchberry; and Maisie knew that something calamitous was in the air.

"Maisie," began the brisker and more downright woman, "my sister and I think you had better be told the truth. You are not to imagine it means anything dreadful, or anything final; it is only very . . . ah! very . . . eh! awkward. We do not know where your mother is. We do not know anywhere to address her. We have not heard from her for more than—for a long time. It is nearly eighteen months since she has sent us any remittances for your . . . ah! schooling and holiday board, or clothes. Her balance is withdrawn from the bank which she mentioned as a reference—overdrawn, in fact; and our letters to her have been returned to us with the information that her present address is not known and no address at all has been left."

This exhaustive recital chilled the blood in Maisie's veins.

"She asked us," continued the precise Miss Stutchberry, "to address the receipt for the last remittance we received, to Mrs. Pleydell, care of Mrs. Jacobs, Villa Chateaubriand, Aix-les-Bains, instead of to the bank as usual. That was—let me see; this is the autumn quarter; the summer quarter—Easter—Christmas—it was last Easter year. The money was overdue, and did not include the Christmas holiday board. When we wrote again, the letter was returned, *Inconnue*. We wrote to the proprietress of the villa, who wrote a civil note in reply to say that no Mrs. Pleydell had ever stayed there; and that a Mrs. Jacobs had stayed there about ten days and had gone away in the usual course, leaving no address. She had left Aix by train, and no one had thought of asking her destination, but she was supposed to have

been *en route* for England. The bank had no information at all. We have advertised, discreetly, in one or two papers at home and abroad; but no answer of any sort has come."

A silence, fraught with much embarrassment, ensued. Then Maisie stood up.

"Do you think, Miss Stutchberry, that my mother has been murdered?"

"Murdered!" ejaculated Mrs. Stutchberry, whose resentment pursued an absconding, not a martyred, Mrs. Pleydell. "Good gracious! *No.* What put such an extraordinary idea into your head? Who in the world would want to murder your mother?"

Maisie could give no satisfactory answer to these questions, and the full extent of the disaster which had overtaken her had not yet dawned on her. Her lack of experience prevented her from gauging the social, financial and sentimental position of a Young Gentlewoman deserted by her mamma. So little had she ever had of her parent's personal care or company that the intimate side of her loss could not come home to her other than vaguely; for, beyond being reminded in her mother's rare letters of the sacrifices that devoted soul was making to keep her at so High-class an Educational Establishment, Maisie had never known anything of a mother's care.

One question she ventured on, hesitatingly.

"Who was it, then, who said I was to study domestic science?"

"It was my sister," said Miss Stutchberry, in a burst of affectionate admiration for that benefactress. "She did not want you to be made anxious or unhappy, but she felt that in the nature of things you cannot stay here for ever, and you must be given some means of making your way in the world and becoming independent. So you will do your very best, Maisie dear, to be useful and

helpful and learn all you can while you are with us. And perhaps, you know, good news will come; any day we might hear."

Mrs. Stutchberry thereupon kissed the overpowered Maisie with benevolent unction, and Miss Stutchberry followed suit. With confused, but real gratitude, and a head filled with whirling ideas of the very newest possible brand, Maisie went off to think over her position and get used to it.

The novels which she had devoured and which she had not sufficient knowledge of the world to estimate at right values, gave her a plentiful supply of plots for the drama of her life. Her mother was murdered; her daughter must drag the plot to light and avenge the crime. Her mother had lost all her money and was destitute; her strong-armed young daughter must find her humble retreat and bring joy and comfort to her bruised soul. Her mother was being hounded down by wicked, jealous women; they must be exposed and defeated and brought to shame. The new idea—quite an unexpected, and undesirable one, from the Stutchberry point of view—began to sprout. The purpose of Maisie's life must be, to find her long-lost parent. She would go out into the world and seek her mother. She figured in her own eyes as the heroine of a real, exciting romance, and her mother as an ill-used victim; for never for one moment did Mrs. Pleydell, in her daughter's search for romantic explanations, appear in the light of the Wicked Parent.

* * * *

Nellie Trent was an orphan, and was looked after by a well-to-do and good-natured aunt, Mrs. Macleod, who was on friendly terms with Mrs. Stutchberry, and was supposed to know the nature of the "bond" between the sisters-in-law. When she came to see her niece, which she always did once or twice a term when she was in

England, she always stayed a night and spent the evening with the two ladies. There was a spare room, in fact, which was known as Mrs. Macleod's room.

To Mrs. Macleod was related, at much length and with a wealth of detail which was withheld from Maisie, the story of the absconding Mrs. Pleydell; and as Mrs. Macleod was going to winter on the Continent, she undertook to make inquiries, based on a description of the defalcating lady and the addresses from which she had written in other years, which might lead to her discovery.

"It will be rather fun," she opined, "I fancy myself a little as an amateur detective. Loud voice, did you say?"

"Deafening," said Miss Stutchberry. "She ought to have been a boatswain. She always seemed to be hailing across a high wind, even when you were quite close. And *loaded* with make-up. Kegged."

"I'll find her," said Mrs. Macleod.

"I think," observed Mrs. Stutchberry, "that you are more likely to hear of her as Meta Rippingsley than as Mrs. Pleydell. On the few occasions we saw her, she took care to tell us how very much better she was known by her stage name than by her merely domestic one!"

"I'll find out something," reasserted Mrs. Macleod.

"The bank told us," mused Miss Stutchberry, "that all communications were forwarded to her under her stage name."

"I seem to know the name, somehow," said Mrs. Macleod. "Meta Rippingsley? Meta Rip—surely that wasn't the woman who did plastic poses or something or other 'in the Altogether,' or as near it as possible?"

"I hardly think that," said Mrs. Stutchberry. "She was not nice in some ways; but she did not seem *that* kind."

"We shall see," said Mrs. Macleod oracularly.

It would not be true to say that Maisie was unhappy; but she was fretted. She longed very earnestly to repay

the Stutchberrys for their kindness, and also to refund them the money for her schooling. She also longed to plunge into her quest in good earnest. Several days passed in an unsettled way; and then the sisters, who believed in letting the Young Gentlewomen know that their care and maintenance involved burdens, conversed at table of the difficulty confronting them in the marriage of the girl who was in charge of the linen. The would-be substitutes were not at all suitable; not at all.

Next day a shy but highly hopeful Young Gentlewoman offered to take up the duties "until you find someone suitable; and, oh, I do so want to do something really useful to help you, after you have been so good." She was told she was a dear child; and after some ladylike hesitation, was confirmed in the position. She took complete charge of the linen and laundry, the clothes of the Young Gentlewomen, and their packing, and, when the Christmas term closed, had the satisfaction of knowing that she had proved trustworthy and competent.

The winter brought bad luck to Mrs. Stutchberry, for she was laid up with a long and troublesome attack of bronchitis. After the first, Maisie took charge, not only of the invalid, but of her house-keeping duties. During the next term she learned a great deal, picking the brains of all and sundry. The servants liked the sunny, warm-hearted girl who took an interest in their families and their love affairs; and they imparted to her many valuable wrinkles, in cleaning, cooking, purchasing, and laundry-work. And in respect of her manifold duties, Miss Stutchberry insisted on extra nourishment. A glass of milk and biscuits for her early rising; a real, not a schoolgirl supper; and a glass of port before going to bed, were provided for her regularly; and the change filled her out into a glowing, blooming freshness which made her a very attractive Young Gentlewoman indeed. Her skin was milk-white, her hair a gold so pale as to be

almost silvern, with a trick of cresting round her forehead; and her white skin was splashed with a red so vivid as almost to look unreal. A cold wind, a rub with a hard towel, or a sudden emotion, would make this scarlet stain spring to the surface with a startling suddenness. With this, eyes of a soft blue grey that changed and deepened almost to purple, and teeth of even whiteness; she was a Young Gentlewoman whom few parents would have been in haste to abandon.

Mrs. Macleod returned from the Continent with much news of the missing parent; but unfortunately none of such a nature as to give practical results. "Mrs. Pleydell" was unknown; but Meta Rippingsley was well remembered in many of her old haunts; and in some she still owed money. She had vanished from the ken of all who knew her, leaving a trail of lurid reminiscence and innuendo, however, that supplied Mrs. Macleod with food for gossip.

"She *was* the Living Statuary person," asserted that lady. "Made a perfect *furore* in London, and used to give the show, by special request, at the hotels she stayed in. It was a great attraction, and brought so many people she used not to be charged for her accommodation! But she has vanished as if she had never existed."

"A regular downright bad lot," went on the narrator, who was enjoying her story far more than her listeners were. "She was never quite what you would call respectable; but she seems completely to have thrown her *bonnet par dessus le moulin.* The people she had taken up with were impossible. It really almost seems like a stroke of fortune, for the girl, that she should have been abandoned, by such a woman!"

Mrs. Macleod was, however, more full of an episode that had engaged her attention. A widow had died, in the boarding-house where she had stayed, leaving a daughter quite unprovided for, but who had been trained

for business. The girl's knowledge of book-keeping, typing, and commercial correspondence in two or three languages had got her a billet at once. She was taken on for the office work at a big hotel, in the town where her mother died, at a fairly decent salary with board and lodging, and was supporting herself without difficulty.

"The very thing for Maisie," cried Mrs. Macleod. "Now see. I am quite well able to afford to do something for this waif, and I do not like the idea of her becoming a burden on you. Send her at my expense to be trained for business, and then I will get her employed."

Maisie enjoyed the training at the School of Commerce very much. The roar of street traffic and the busy hum of the great class-rooms was a wonderful change from the hush of the High-class Establishment, and she delighted in every minute of it. It rather took the edge off her romance to find dozens of humdrum young women training themselves as a matter of course to go "out into the world" and earn their living; but then they had no missing mother to find and rescue. Maisie liked them all, and was good friends with them; and what was better still, made good progress with her work. And the day came when she passed tests of various sorts and was pronounced competent.

For one term Maisie had been "Sarah-Jane" and linen-maid, for two terms housekeeper, for six months at the School of Commerce; and Christmas again, back at the school, found her doing just as she used to do. Miss Stutchberry had given her, during spare hours, as much education as she could; and Maisie worked conscientiously during the day, giving herself up, at night, to the joys of fiction. And then the quiet broke, and things happened in a frenzied hurry. Mrs. Macleod telegraphed from somewhere on the Swiss border to have Maisie sent at once, adding that she would meet her

on the way, and would write details. Mrs. and Miss Stutchberry came home, and an orgy of packing and purchasing ensued. Maisie hoped against hope that the letter with details would arrive before she left, but it did not.

"Who is paying for all my things?" she asked, as she stowed away the well-made, becoming costumes with tissue paper in the folds.

"Mrs. Macleod," said Miss Stutchberry; "she has paid for your training and outfit, and we have given you your home and keep. My dear, we hope very much indeed that you may be happy and successful, but remember we will never deny you a home."

Some graceful tears were shed, and some warm acknowledgments made; but there was no time for much discussion. Never would the sisters have confessed how much relieved they were by the actual materialization of Mrs. Macleod's hopes and the departure of Maisie for the Continent. It took her more definitely away than a position in an English hotel. They gave the girl generous parting gifts—Mrs. Stutchberry a fur jacket and a gold handled umbrella, and Miss Stutchberry a really good dressing-gown and a smart rain-coat—"not a volume of Shakespeare with an inscription, my dear, but something that will help you to hold your head up and look your best"; and Maisie set her face to the sea and fared forth upon her quest of independence and a missing parent with high courage and a heart full of warm memories.

CHAPTER II

ENGLAND'S HOPE

THE basement of No. 29, Percy Street, was well warmed and lighted, that cold winter evening of the day Maisie left the High-class Establishment that had been her home for so long. The red curtains drawn across the windows let a comforting crimson glow into the area, and Police-Constable A247, slapping his hands as he stopped to speak to the rubber-soled sergeant going his rounds, nodded towards it jocularly and said, "We could do with a turn in there, what?" The sergeant said "Ah" in tones charged with the deepest significance, and looked down at his rubber-shod feet. He then vouchsafed the further monosyllable, "Cook?"

"No such luck," said Police-Constable A247, on an aggrieved note; and turned and spat, to give relief to his feelings. "All blasted 'gentlemen's lodgings,' all along here. Not a gentleman's *house* among the lot of them. Lodgings kept by retired butlers who've married skivvies; *you* know! Skin a flint, them wimmin."

Sergeant Ferryman nodded his agreement and spat too, aiming carefully at a bit of orange-peel.

"No. 29's where Lord Johnny lives," he remarked, casually.

"This *is* No. 29," responded the constable, informingly.

"Ah!" once more oracularly uttered the sergeant, and they flapped their arms and stamped.

"Smart chap, Lord Johnny," commented the sergeant, presently.

"He's *that*," returned the constable, as one who should

say, "But he's a good deal of something else besides." And as they breathed hard, and flapped, and stamped, another footstep was heard in the street.

A man came round the nearer corner and walked up with a quick, light, certain tread. The sound of his steps was even and elastic; nothing heavy. Yet for all the certainty and quickness, there was something furtive too. He hesitated the least bit: and then went on. But he had given the impression that he had intended to stop at No. 29.

His footsteps sounded, brisk and clean, up the street. Then he crossed over.

"Wonder who that is?" asked the sergeant, of no one in particular. "Seem to know the face. Now, where have I . . ." He looked, once more, for inspiration, to his boots.

"Ah!" he repeated, straightening himself. "If I was you, Bedford, I'd be going on." And he walked off in the direction from which the man with the quick footfall had come.

"Goo'-night," said Police-Constable A247, resuming the plodding tramp peculiar to his kind. And he, too, went his ways.

Sergeant Ferryman was an officer of some experience, and seldom forgot a face. He soon placed the one which had caught his attention. And he wove a theory round it and adjusted his theory to facts, and studied the facts through the medium of fancy, very much to his satisfaction. The result was still pleasing him when his ear caught the quick elastic footstep once more, as he waited for it, just round the corner.

Swiftly it came, returning, down the side of the street opposite No. 29. Quietly it crossed the street, unerringly it made for the entrance to No. 29. A light tap-atap-tap on the kitchen window-pane with a walking-stick supplemented the low, repressed summons with the knocker.

As the man straightened himself from reaching to the basement window, Sergeant Ferryman in his rubber-soled shoes passed deliberately before the house, catching the ruddy light full on the tapping man's face.

A man of medium height; a "gentleman," undeniably. A criminal for all that. A bad, defiant face, a furtive mien, the look of a cur watching to snap. Handsome, exceedingly; fascinating, perhaps. Dangerous and unscrupulous to a degree.

"I thought so," said Sergeant Ferryman to himself.

And again, "So I weren't wrong!"

No. 29 was where Lord Johnny lived, too.

"Ah!" said Sergeant Ferryman, oracularly.

The furtive figure disappeared into the broad entrance hall which dignified the premises of No. 29, after the door had been cautiously opened; and reappeared in the cheerful, well-warmed kitchen. The man's clothes were thin and he had no overcoat. He held his hands to the kitchen fire, and shuddered with returning warmth. A woman sitting at the table, who looked up over her glasses and said "Good evening" with dubious welcome, gathered up her sewing and took off her spectacles.

"I'm going to bed," she said to the other man, who came in with a bottle and a lemon.

"Right y'are," he replied, carelessly, and she slipped out. "Hot or cold?" to the new comer.

"Hot, man; hot!" said the handsome man; not hastily or testily, not familiarly or even friendlily; but as one used to state his wishes and have them attended to.

A glass of hot toddy was prepared, and passed to him, with skilled speed.

The entertainer was tall, as well as stout. Not good-looking, like the other; of coarse fibre. He was a powerful man in the prime of life, well-preserved and of great bulk. His face was reddish and mottled; his hands hairy and veined; his neck thick; his ears huge and

fleshy. He had been a gentleman's gentleman, and a first-rate servant at that. His wife had been nurse and young ladies' maid in a family whose secrets she knew better than members of the family themselves. To her lasting unhappiness, she had told some of them to the blackmailing brute she had married.

The two men drew close together, drank, roasted themselves and talked in sunken voices. Not once did they say a word in a tone that could have been heard the other side of the room. The topic of their conversation appeared of enthralling interest.

While thus engaged, a loud footstep sounded outside, the iron gate clanged, a latchkey rattled in the lock. The door was opened and slammed, and some person who really enjoyed making a noise and who apparently liked to advertise his comings and goings, made his way to the stairs. At the foot, he appeared to pause, and rapping a walking stick on the bottom stair, called out in a peremptory, but hearty voice, "Fen-ton!"

"Coming, sir," responded the ex-valet, with a wonderful suaveness of manner. There was something of real artistic merit in that manner, so smooth it was, so soothing, so respectful, yet so faintly suggestive of something that was not actually amusement but indulgence; indulgence for someone who was spoilt, who had to be made allowances for, but who was admired too. It was a perfect manner, with not one false tone to suggest hypocrisy.

"I'll take my grog hot, hot, er . . . Fenton, to-night. Help me off with this coat, will you? I don't believe it is mine; someone must have . . . thanks . . . take care. Oh! is it mine? Doesn't feel like it!"

It was a fixed idea of Lord Johnny's that one's things were not safe at the Club. They were annexed or changed, or otherwise made free with, by abominably careless, or even dishonest members, who thought noth-

ing of putting on a fellow's hat and walking off with it and leaving any old thing for him to put on his head instead; or even whipping off with his stick or umbrella. It was insufferable. Nothing was safe.

When Fenton brought the requisites for hot grog, and mixed them deftly—on the principle that Lord Johnny always insisted on, namely, "one of sour, two of sweet, four of strong and eight of weak," with certain additions, or modifications, of which Fenton guarded the secret—Lord Johnny had got himself into a loose jacket and was sprawling on a teak Bombay chair with his feet stretched out on the long supports. His evening coat was flung over another chair; Fenton picked it up and took it across the landing to the bedroom, folding it and laying it by.

Lord Johnny kept up a rambling chatter, whether the man was there to listen or not, and did not expect or desire answers. The chatter went on after Fenton had left the room with his usual valedictory "You'll ring if you want anything, my lord? You are quite comfortable? Good-night, my lord."

Lord John Delane was a big, picturesque, elderly gentleman, with a shock of iron-grey hair and a pair of very light grey eyes under black brows and lashes. He looked very fierce and penetrating, and his face had an appearance of having been carved or sculptured from some hard red material and then scraped—its angles were all so sharp and its contours so bluff and its surface so rasped. He had commanded a smart cavalry regiment, handled some awkward frontier affairs in India and devil-worship clearances in West Africa; and acted as Delimitation Commissioner in sundry boundary disputes. He had also once had a small governorship; but his eccentricities had deterred subsequent governments from repeating this experiment. He first came into prominent publicity after the South African War, when he became

one of the advanced advocates of reconstruction for the army. Warfare in close formation and at close quarters was gone for ever; long-range rifle fire and open formation were what we must go for; and all opposition was to be silenced by exposing the follies and the muddles perpetrated by those who thought they knew better than Lord Johnny. He expressed his views in a campaign distinguished principally for its loud shouting, and attracted almost as much attention—and admiration—as Mr. Horatio Bottomley.

Lord Johnny threatening to expose the Government had become one of the standing features of British election contests. A large section of the public believed in him, and waited feverishly for the time to come when the threatened disclosures would be made; though agreed that it would be disastrous for them to be made prematurely. Other people laughed scornfully at the noble lord, and spoke of him as one who had been threatening revelations for half a life-time, but had never made any—because he did not know any to make! But he had become, in the course of time, a sort of public depository for grievances. Navy men, army men, dockyard men, civil servants, armament firms, inventors, editors, engineers, wrote to him or interviewed him, at different times and for divers reasons. Under the seal of confidence, technical secrets were laid bare to him; ways in which the public service was being let down, the public safety jeopardized, the public resources squandered, national secrets endangered, national welfare gambled with, national safeguards neglected; in very thoughtlessness, in childish levity, in criminal folly and disregard of warnings, or in hopeless ignorance and incapacity. And Lord Johnny had filed all the letters and docketed and scheduled the information, and ranged it on his great desk in categories marked "Confidential" and "For Parliamentary use"; and in the course of the private interviews

that were a part of his public life, he was in the habit of referring to these files and dockets and fanning the indignation of his informants to a yet fiercer blaze by adding to their grievance or revelation the still more intolerable grievance or revelation of another. And these tales were of course repeated, and travelled round at a great rate, and were added to and altered and misrepeated in the course of their journeyings, until they became unrecognizable and were then repeated back to the people from whom they had started, who did not and who could not be expected to recognize their own offspring, and thought they were hearing an entirely new and extraordinary scandal. And it happened that certain thoughtful and deeply troubled souls left Lord Johnny's presence much concerned, gravely disturbed at having put certain information in his hands; and wondering whether his childish folly, and hopeless ignorance and deplorable irresponsibility were in any way less dangerous and depressing than that of the Governments whose incapacity he was to expose.

Lord Johnny was a very pleasant gentleman to work for—a very gentlemanly gentleman, as the gentleman's gentleman downstairs said of him. He looked round as Fenton left the room and saw everything as he liked to see it and was accustomed to see it,

"Very comfortable," he said aloud, regardless of the discreetly closed door. "Very comfortable; very sound, very useful fellow, Fenton, knows his job from A to Z. Very best class of confidential servant. Should hate . . . couldn't stand . . . fancy living where you had to lock everything up. . . ."

He gulped the hot grog and felt in his waistcoat pocket for a toothpick; and as he took it out, remembered something else that had been consigned to his pockets. Where were those letters, damn it? *Damn.* Oh! of course.

Fenton had taken his dress coat into the bedroom; yes, all right.

He dozed on, blinking at the fire . . . and woke up with a start to find it was half-past two. With a great noise, stumbling a little, and slamming doors, he got to bed.

It was later than that, or earlier—a quarter to five, to be precise—when the visitor downstairs took himself off. Police-Constable A247 was at the other end of his beat, and Sergeant Ferryman had been relieved by a sergeant of less perspicacity and resource; and no one but a doubled-up old wayfarer, hieing him from a night on the Embankment seats to some other equally festive daytime resort, pausing as he trotted to examine stray bits of paper in the hope of some day lighting on a lost bank-note, saw the furtive man with the crisp light step come out of No. 29.

" 'E's been makin' a night of it," mused the rummager. "Wonder what gye lydy lives there! Wish 'e'd 'ad my plyce and I 'is!"

CHAPTER III

RATS AND ROOKS

MRS. FENTON, as the saying goes, had only regretted her marriage once in her life, and that was every day of it after the first week. She was terribly afraid of the smooth scoundrel she had trusted so ill-advisedly: but there were some things he could not bully, bribe, or cajole her into doing. She would have no part in his schemes, nor any knowledge of them; and she had sent away the little lad who was the pride and love of her fond motherly heart, to her own people, so that his evil father should not have his bringing up in his hands. Some peculiar principle of ethics which women of her class and kind hold close and dear, forbade her to leave her husband; indeed, in the knowledge that you should never make an unnecessary enemy, Fenton had been uniformly good to her and thoughtful for her. He could, when wishing to please her greatly, in the presence of "smart" acquaintances, or his own family, put on a manner of devotion to her "which no dook could beat," Maria's mother declared. Only once or twice, and of deliberate purpose, had he let his really terrifying wrath loose upon her. She had conceived an idea of the possibilities of that wrath, all the more dreadful by reason of the ease and smoothness with which he could bridle and conceal it. He was an inscrutable mystery to her; she never knew what he was thinking of.

One thing only she understood. It was a thing she had in common with him, their joint heritage from generations of faithful, honourable, upright servitors whose

pride in the families they served was greater than that of the families themselves. By her lasting love for her own "young ladies"—now married women with growing young ladies of their own—and the joy with which she recalled proofs of their trust in her, she understood Fenton's deference to the man who had been Master Dickie. Master Dickie had come on bad times. He was, if anything, more unscrupulous than Fenton himself; she feared him more, and loathed his presence. But she knew what her husband felt about him, and it never entered her head to protest.

When Master Dickie left No. 29 at a quarter to five that winter morning, it is possible that Sergeant Ferryman might have had difficulty in recognizing him; for he wore an old overcoat, handsome and shapely still, of Lord Johnny's, and his broken-brimmed bowler hat was exchanged for a fashionable Homberg. His throat was muffled in the soft fawn knitted silk scarf intended by Maria for Miss Eva's Master Reginald at Easter; and a pair of only slightly soiled dogskin driving-gloves sheltered the fingers that had been so nipped with last night's cold.

"First-rate, Fenton," he had remarked, turning himself round and looking over his shoulder. "I shall be all right in these." And with an extraordinarily pleasant smile, but without a word of thanks, Master Dickie took himself off, feeling that ginger was still hot in the mouth and that there were good things going for those that knew where to look for them. Fenton watched him down the steps and smiled back at him as he turned and lifted his walking-stick in farewell salute; and with a click at the back of his throat that spoke of genuine feeling, the gentleman's gentleman prepared to make up for some of the sleep that he had missed by his vigil.

The rookery to which Master Dickie returned was also a basement; but a basement that was a great contrast to

the warm kitchen premises of No. 29. In a dilapidated street turning off Theobald's Road—a street that had once been fashionable and that displayed handsome door knockers cankered by neglect, on doors that concealed stately cornices, Adams fireplaces, and staircases which though grimed with filth still charmed with their fine curves and spacious proportions—a small stone-paved alley ran off at right angles. Half-way down this turning, appropriately and poetically yclept Pansy Alley, a dark arched entry rose above a few stone steps. This entrance, narrow and reeking of sour refuse, gave into two largish, almost unlighted rooms, which had been part of the butler's premises of the big house in the front street. Some dreadful specimens of humanity brushed past Master Dickie as he stooped to the entrance—shabby, slinking, greasy, cowed, brutal, snarling; one look, half-fierce, half-frightened, wholly suspicious, all the greeting vouchsafed. Inside, the low-browed room had an atmosphere that struck one like a dirty hand, so thick, so fetid it was. Palliasses of an indescribable colour, stained and torn, lay about the floor, dragged as close to the still warm range as could be contrived. On a big gas ring a big black kettle steamed and sang, the only cheerful thing in the room. A long plank table on trestles ran down the middle, with benches on each side; and benches were placed round the walls. Under these benches the palliasses were rolled up, together with a blanket, and in some cases even an apology for a pillow; and fastened by padlocked chains to big rivets in the walls.

Some of the undesirable inmates still lay, in unlovely slumber, on the palliasses. Some hunkered round the range and sucked up their mugfuls of hot tea in loud gulps. Tea was a tradition in this thieves' kitchen. None of the *habitués* would tolerate coffee. The tea was of quite decent flavour and strength.

The company was a silent one. Voluble speech was not a passport to the goodwill of the "Vaults," which was the name chosen by the proprietor for his unsavoury premises. Even so sensational an event as the arrival of Dick the Toff in new clothes did not provoke conversation. That it had not passed without notice was obvious later on, when one after another rolled up his palliasse and lounged or shuffled out.

"S'long," said a big and travelled ruffian to the proprietor. "P'raps *I* can murder a toff and come back in his swag!"

Dick the Toff took no notice outwardly; but little escaped his acute observation. He sat on one of the benches, put his new hat on his knees, leant over the table on his arms, and feigned slumber.

"Mornin', Boss," sneered a slouching thing clad in deposits of grease and mud. He moved past the still figure at the end of the table and gave him an elaborate lurch as he passed. "Don't be afryd, m'lord. I shan't disgryce you by speakin' when I meets yer with m'lydy."

"Chuck it," said the "Boss," curtly, but not ill-humouredly.

The Boss was a man of medium height, sinewy and lean. His fists were like lead; his arms like ships' cables; nevertheless he never went unarmed. He was a match and more for any man who had ever lodged at the Vaults; what he feared was a combination. For he was known to be making money. The Vaults was a steadily paying concern; and there were other lines of business as well. He had a past, which soured the present and dimmed the future. A false charge of illicit diamond-buying had been lodged against him in Kimberley, to make a police case. Under the infamous "trap" law he had been sentenced to a term of five years. When he came out he tracked down the detective who had arranged the "trap," ran him to earth at Capetown, and

hammered him to pulp with a sjambok—which, being made of hippopotamus hide, did the business rather well for him. For that he did three years "on the Breakwater"; coming out weighted with a lasting sympathy with criminals.

One by one the sorrowful items of humanity took themselves off. The Boss began to get busy.

"Either clear out or lend a hand," he said, in the same curt but not ill-humoured way.

Dick the Toff sat up. The sleepiness that was stealing over him made his eyes shine; eyes that were so pale and hard as to be quite out of tone in the handsome face.

"I'll lend a hand, Boss," he responded, yawning, "then you and I will have a palaver, when it's cleaned up."

The hat, coat, and muffler were hung up in the inner room, with newspaper to protect them from the dank walls; and the outer room was swilled down, the mugs ranged on nails, the range emptied and cleaned and the fire laid ready for the evening cooking. Pots were scoured and table and benches scrubbed, brushes and buckets and mops flung into some limbo behind the sink. The coal-scuttle was filled and the scraps carted away. The two men then washed their heads, arms and shoulders in the sink, put on their coats, and repaired to the inner room, where the Boss, on an understanding that seemed to have been previously established, pulled the corks of two bottles of Bass.

The inner room had cocoa-nut matting, and a camp bed before the wide old-fashioned hearth. A big worn chair, with horse-hair and springs sticking out of a hole in the seat, a knee-hole writing desk equally old and battered, two Windsor chairs and a Windsor table; and a sort of cupboard which served for dresser and sideboard, were all its furnishings. The door was fitted with heavy bolts, two cross bars and a chain. The Boss took no

risks. A single gas jet was the only attempt at illumination.

Dick the Toff had fed well at No. 29, and the beer finished off his rations harmoniously. The two Windsor chairs were drawn together near the table, the door being flung wide to command a full view of the outer room. The Boss drew his brows together in deep attention as Dick the Toff took up his parable and evidently continued a previously begun tale.

"Careless devil," interposed the Boss. "Letting them all down; doesn't care a damn, I suppose?"

"Doesn't think," Dick took him up. "Hasn't brains for it. Thinks himself a wonder. England's Only Hope; you know the kind of silly ass."

"That would be three of us. Would it pan out rich enough?" asked the Boss, coming down to practical details.

Dick lowered his voice again and emphasized his words with taps on the table, using his long neat fingers as if they were some finely balanced piece of machinery.

"What is the risk?" asked the Boss, curtly cutting in.

"I'm inclined to think, not great. Nothing like so great as Nick Ticker runs every day. Our people don't like high falutin about that sort of thing these days. It is not good form; and besides, they are getting not to set so much store by it. It's those others who put a fancy price on it, and if they are willing to pay, let them."

The Boss thought this over.

"What is the next move?"

"Money," laconically.

"H-m-m."

"I purpose," said Dick the Toff, with some precision, "arraying myself in the garments of the good Lord Johnny, England's, and my, Only Hope, and sallying forth at a seasonable hour to seek the gilded youth and

the damned foolishness of Good Society at the Nightingale. There will I get me shekels, by the valour of my good right arm and the sleight of mine hand at cards. Then I will take a room in those very select lodgings for gentlemen. That's the programme."

The Boss thought deeply. Then he took from his pocket a handful of loose coin.

"One, two, sovereigns; three half-crowns and a shilling; one fiver. That's a normal pocketful. Seven pounds eight and sixpence. I'll enter it."

One of the drawers of the writing-desk was being opened, when a quick furtive step sounded in the outer room. The Boss slammed the drawer, and the Toff covered the money.

A slim pointed-faced young man, breathing quickly and with mottles of colour on his unwholesome skin, came quickly into the kitchen.

"They are after me," he whispered wheezily, trying not to display agitation.

What followed was very quick and deft. The Boss laid hold of a loathsome rag hanging against the wall and drew the man on to a bench, wiping his boots with extreme thoroughness and speed. Then he hurried the fugitive through the inner room to the wide fireplace, from the recesses of which he reached down some bundles of rags, flue brushes, and nondescript accumulations of rubbish, which he laid carefully in the hearth.

"Up you go," he said, quick and low. "Use the pegs and bear round to the left. It gets wider."

Up scrambled the slim youth, alert and agile; and the Boss carefully replaced the rags and the dangling brushes on the pegs he had used for foothold. Then, taking off his soot-soiled jacket, he folded it inside out and laid it down neatly on the camp bed. Kneeling on a bit of sacking, he began polishing the brass of the battered fender and sweeping up the hearth preparatory to black-leading

the grate-basket. His cleaning paraphernalia was spread around in picturesque disorder when the sound of excited voices broke in.

"Dahn 'ere, 'e went. Certain sure, Mister."

"Nah, 'e didn't, 'e were only foxing. Doubled back, 'e did. Bet you a brown 'un."

"Garn. I seen 'im."

"Garn yourself. That's the Vaults."

"Gord!" In real consternation. The Boss's name and fame had travelled.

A measured tread down the passage announced that the Arm—and Foot—of the Law was arriving.

The Boss looked across the table from where he was kneeling and lifted an eyebrow sardonically at the police officer and the plain-clothes man and the other excited person with them.

"*Good* morning," in elaborate rebuke. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Come orf it, Boss," said the plain-clothes man. "There's a man here, someone we want. Better hand him over and hold your tongue."

"Might it be this gentleman?" inquired the Boss, rising to his feet and indicating Dick the Toff, who sat with imperturbable calm through all these proceedings, leaning an elbow on the table and fondling the not quite empty beer glass.

"Neaw," said the plain-clothes man derisively. "Don't try to be funny."

"I think it you who are the jokers if jokes are going," said the Boss, sternly. "What kind of a game is it to barge in here as if you were dealing with criminals? Where is your warrant, for coming into my place without my permission?"

"Don't be a fool," said the sergeant.

"Who's being a fool?" retorted the Boss, "unless it is you, for doing what you know you have no business to

do. Produce your warrant, or clear off my premises."

The officers looked irresolute; the situation was awkward.

"Come," said the Boss, suddenly altering his tone, "you know you are in the wrong. Own up. You can search my place inside-out; there is no earthly reason you shouldn't. But you got no business to come in without my leave unless you have got a warrant. You know you ain't. Say you are sorry, and there's an end of it. You can search and welcome."

"Well, you ain't far out, you know, Boss; but it is poor fun waitin' about for warrants when the thing is done under your nose and you see the chap slip away. It's always us that gets the blame; and if it was your place that'd been broke into, you wouldn't thank us for a warrant; you'd a darn sight sooner see the chap that did it caught."

"What is it?" asked the Boss, affably, as the search proceeded.

"Broke into a curio shop. Valuable stuff, gone off with a lot. Must have been there all night. This gentleman saw him," nodding at the excited person. "Can I look up that flue? All right, I won't disturb your things. Thanks."

The officer craned his neck up the flue, noting its bend to the left, but being quite reassured by the undisturbed bundles of rags and rubbish dangling there. He withdrew his head and rubbed the soot off his hands.

The other room was equally void of profit.

"Here! whose place is this?" shouted the Boss, fiercely, to a cluster of peeping heads, which promptly removed themselves. "My word! I'll let you know!"

The crowd removed itself to the street, and was presently gratified by being witness to the parting civilities exchanged between the affable host and the majesty of the law.

"Ain't 'e a corf-drop?" was the admiring comment.

The law, however, was not so gullible as appeared on the surface, for, some quarter of an hour later, the plain-clothes man reappeared, with a knock and an apology.

"Sorry to disturb you," he smiled. "Did I leave a small book of notes lying about here?"

"Not that I'm aware of," replied the Boss, cheerily. "You can search, if you like. Shan't trouble you for a warrant for that!"

A perfunctory search revealed nothing, but had the law returned but two minutes later, it would have found the Boss engaged in brushing the tell-tale soot marks off his coat. As it was, he laid it, still folded, over his arm.

"Artful as a wagon-load of monkeys," was his remark, when the visitor had once more departed. Dick the Toff nodded. What had greatly annoyed him about the whole transaction was that his new hat and overcoat, wrapped in newspaper, had been the subject of close scrutiny and some careful notes in the pocket-book which was supposed to be missing but which both knew to be reposing safely in the officer's breast pocket, and which he knew they knew to be so reposing.

Dick the Toff slept off his annoyance with his arms on the table and his head on his arms; and then, arrayed in much glory, betook him to the haunts of gilded folly. It took him two days' work to find and land his mug, but the end of that time left him in possession of £40 and some loose change. The greater part of this he laid out on a secondhand suit-case and portmanteau, the latter respectably battered, the former respectably preserved; a new suit of dark blue diagonals, some shirts, collars and underwear; and a decent pair of boots. Eight pounds ten remained to him, out of which he paid Mrs. Fenton for a week's board and lodging in advance, and took possession of the small back ground-floor room at No. 29 in the name of Richard Peyton.

The other lodgers included an erratic person who spent most of his time in desultory travel and explorations, who occupied the second-floor and occasionally lent or sublet his rooms to hard-up friends or to "oblige" Mrs. Fenton; the no less erratic Lord John Delane; and a Bank of London official of regular habits and irreproachable reputation, who took up the best ground-floor rooms. This lodger, Rookwood by name, was the nephew of one of Mrs. Fenton's "young ladies." He was the first to meet the new inmate. An encounter took place in the hall, in which Fenton did master of the ceremonies with his usual respectful and indulgent suavity, and the Toff bore himself with grave and well-bred reserve. Nevertheless, Anthony Rookwood was conscious of an instantaneous and unreasoning dislike and distrust of this quiet stranger in whom Fenton appeared so interested.

The Bank of London was—the Bank of London. Traditions of the highest financial standing graced its annals. Its young gentlemen wore frock coats and buttonholes, the same being allowed for in their generous salaries. Its business was conducted with pomp and decorum, its crusted and hoary customs and regulations were as immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Its clients numbered Cabinet Ministers, Chief Justices, Peers and Peeresses, Royalties—British and Foreign—old firms and new millionaires, Trusts, Co's, and Amalgamations, gentry, tradesmen, and trades unions. It also catered for an astonishing number of artistic, theatrical, and variety world clients, *demi-mondaines* whose backing was of the requisite solvency, and husbands who banked in different names to indulge different tastes, fancies, and enterprises. And Meta Rippingsley, with Fame at her feet and a horde of wealthy men scrambling for her favours, was not a client to be despised. So the Bank of London, by one of those coin-

cidences more frequent in real life than the readers of fiction believe to be the case, was the bank at which Mrs. Pleydell had overdrawn her account the year before the Sisters Stutchberry had it borne in upon them that one of their Young Gentlewomen had been abandoned by the parent whose duty it was to supply the quarterly flow of fees and board money that maintained the High-class Educational Establishment from which they derived their living.

CHAPTER IV

THINGS THAT MAISIE—AND OTHERS—REMEMBERED

"Oh, I think people are so kind!" cried Maisie, as she drank her tea and ate *brioche* in Mrs. Macleod's sitting-room on the Swiss frontier. The wood fire threw out a pleasant glow, the tea, though watery, was hot and sweet, the view superb. Maisie, who had spoken French from her babyhood, had made out her journey without a hitch, and Mrs. Macleod's welcome had been cordial. The girl had no quarrel with a world so kind.

"Don't run away with the idea that you will only meet well-disposed people, and that you can trust everyone you meet."

Mrs. Macleod spoke rather grimly, and hoped Maisie was not going to be a silly.

"Of course I know there are bad people; a great many," said Maisie, meditatively. And with a fear that was almost prophetic, added, "I hope I shall know them when I meet them!"

"The best way," broke in Mrs. Macleod, decisively, "is not to trust anyone you do not know. It is the safest, and saves trouble in the end."

"Is my work here?" asked Maisie, putting down her cup.

"No, no. I will take you there to-morrow and hand you over. It is a dear little place, where I have stayed once or twice lately—a dear little place. It is not far from here; Mont Roselle."

"Mont Roselle?" repeated Maisie, her eyes fixed on the great expanse of mountain and valley seen from the window.

"Yes. Mont Roselle. The Hôtel de la Côte is a very smart place and extraordinarily well managed. I do not know that I have ever been in a more comfortable hotel. Let me see—what is the name of the manager——" She turned to find her handbag, and began rummaging among some letters.

"Mont Roselle, Mont Roselle," repeated Maisie, softly, and then, "M-o-o-o-ont Ro*selle!*" ending on a crisp high note.

Mrs. Macleod looked up, startled. She had heard that quite lately.

"What made you say that?" she asked sharply. "Where did you hear it?"

Maisie moved her eyes from the mountains and stared back at Mrs. Macleod. For a few moments she looked nonplussed.

"What did I say?" she asked. "Mont Roselle? Oh, yes." Then slowly, "I know Mont Roselle, don't I?"

"Do you?"

"I think so. I think I must." She puzzled it over to herself. "Mont Roselle! Mount R—— Oh! That is where the fat porter is. *He* says M-o-o-o-ont Ro*selle!* He used to ride me about on his barrow thing."

She imitated the long-drawn monosyllable and the high note at the end, again, and laughed at the recollection.

"I must have been very little," she cried, "because I used to think that '*M-o-o-o-ont*' meant 'me'—him, the big porter; and I called him Mothure Yoselle. He told me that wasn't his name: his name was Monsieur Passepartout."

"Did you live there?" asked Mrs. Macleod, with scarce concealed excitement.

"I don't think so," answered Maisie, the puzzled look coming back. "I think we came there. Once or twice, I should think, because I remember hearing the porter

call out and knowing it was him and that we were back there. There is a waterfall, isn't there? . . . somewhere or other. I remember he took me to see it."

"The porter?"

"No, no. I beg your pardon. The man who brought us."

"A friend?"

"I suppose so." Maisie was doubtful.

"Not your father?"

Maisie shook her head.

"I don't think he could have been. My mother said once to Madame Binon that it was absurd to suppose I could remember my father. And I don't think it could have been my father anyway, because I didn't like going out with him, and he promised to show me the water coming down, to make me go."

Maisie stopped suddenly, as a queer revival of memory brought back, vividly, a horrible scene; a flushed, furious woman on a sofa, with one leg exposed up to the knee, shouting . . . shouting hideous things; and a man—the man—striking a blow with something caught off a table; an ivory paper-knife, was it? The woman, who flung herself back from the blow, clutched at a child who was cowering near, to shield herself. The thing had caught the child on the collarbone.

Was that child herself? Was that the reason of the tiny scar, like a bit of finger-nail, on her white neck? Was she the child who screamed so wildly, so that a woman burst into the room and there was more row? What was it the fat porter used to say—*"Pauv'e p'tite ange, chérie?"*

Strange that in all this, there was no memory of the brilliant mother. But who were these dreadful people . . . ? She could not talk about it to Mrs. Macleod.

That astute lady resolved not to go to Mont Roselle

without interviewing the porter, who was, she knew, still to the fore.

"Who did you say your mother spoke to about your not remembering your father?" she asked presently.

"Madame Binon."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know. Just a friend; a friend of mamma's. At least, she was always there. That was when we were in Paris? . . . yes, in Paris. But mamma told Baptiste that she was a blood-sucker."

"That doesn't sound very nice."

"No. I don't think mamma liked her. She hated her always coming. Baptiste used to laugh and say *'Du chantage, du chantage!'* "

"Who was Baptiste?" asked Mrs. Macleod, gravely.

"Madame Binon brought him. Mamma must have wanted him to come very much, because Madame Binon was always reminding her that she brought him. I liked Baptiste; he was a dear. He used to ask me often if I would leave mamma and come away with him. Mamma used to say, 'Get a . . .' "

Maisie suddenly broke off. Mamma's remark did not seem repeatable, all of a sudden. Surely that was not what she really had said? Maisie's face turned scarlet and she hurried on.

"Baptiste always talked English, and mamma always talked French, except when there were things that she called downright. She said you could be more downright in English. When Baptiste made her send me to the Convent, I didn't see him any more; and when the Sisters sent me to say good-bye to mamma she would not tell me where he had gone. *'Tu ne le reverras pas, p'tite, tu ne le reverras pas.'* "

"What did you say good-bye to your mother for?"

"Because I was going to school. Or was it because she was going away? I can't remember. It has all got

mixed. It was the *Bonnes Sœurs* from the *Couvent* who took me to Mrs. Stutchberry's. It must have been a long time . . . a very long time before mamma came to take me for my holidays. I did not know her, at first, when I saw her . . . her hair was different."

"What Convent was it?"

"I don't know. *'Au couvent.' 'Les bonnes sœurs.'* I can't remember anything else. Everybody seemed to know—you know what I mean."

Maisie had a clear notion, by this time, that Mrs. Macleod was trying to "find things out." She did not exactly resent it, but did not think it very good manners. As for Mrs. Macleod, the unconscious revelations made in that short conversation gave her a good deal to think about.

"I wonder how much of that sort of thing has been told to the Young Gentlewomen!" she pondered. "I must ask Nellie. Good gracious me, what a risk one runs in sending a girl to even the most High-class Educational Establishment! If Maisie had been only a little older when all this happened, she would have known enough to pollute a whole college, let alone a 'limited number of Young Gentlewomen.' "

The hotel to which Mrs. Macleod introduced Maisie was a very smart affair in a very bright, crowded, fashionable little resort flung into a niche of mountain and graced by a bounding waterfall. Maisie's heart beat with sudden warmth on hearing the familiar call in the fat porter's familiar voice; and she recognized, in the vague way one remembers such things, streets and buildings and public monuments, shrunk to much less grandiose proportions than her childish memories pictured them. There was a fountain which had seemed of superb dimensions and importance; it dwindled to a squat, rather dingy affair. A grotesque and garish frontage which had

once been a symbol of wealth and glory struck distastefully on her sight. The slope up which they drove had once seemed a tremendous hill; half-way was the new hotel, the old one being relegated to the insignificance of a pot-house. Two new streets, all with brand new shops and brand new fashions in their windows, decked Mont Roselle for her new *clientèle.* People had come there before because it was cheap and unfashionable, now they came because it was expensive and select.

Maisie was presented to the Manager, an awe-inspiring person who spoke good English; and saw the open office in which she would do her work, and the male and female colleagues—one of each—who were working there already. Then she was handed over to the housekeeper, and shown her bedroom, which she was to share with the female colleague. Never having had a room to herself in her life, this did not strike her at first as a hardship. That evening, having unpacked her belongings and partaken of an alien repast, she said good-bye to Mrs. Macleod, receiving from her many friendly maxims and instructions as to conduct. Later on she studied in abashed surprise the bedroom evolutions of her Swiss colleague, who had been educated in Sweden and had some very advanced habits indeed. Maisie hid her scarlet face under the bedclothes and shuddered at the enforced propinquity.

Mrs. Macleod found the big porter fairly easy to get on with.

"P'tite fillette qui m'appelait Monsieur Passe-partout? Si j'm'en rappelle! Mais quoi donc, elle doi'êt'e grande, à l'heure de maintenant? Pau' p'tite ange chérie!"

Abandoned by her mother? Ah, that is a *fichu mauvaise affaire.* He was not surprised. But he did not want to be *là-dedans, par exemple;* it would mean *la préfecture. Il ne fait pas bon se fourrer le nez dans des affaires de préfecture.* No? No police? Ah well, good then. *Ma-*

dame sa mère? Peste. What a specimen! Brandy, lovers, *des scènes, des histoires;* and *la pau' p'tite ange chérie* not properly dressed or *coiffée*—it was *tout c'qu'il y avait de plus mauvais.* How he knew? Wasn't the *femme-de-chambre* at the Auberge Bonhomme his *promise,* his spouse now? *Bien entendu,* that was why *la p'tite* came so often to the station. Rosalie used to take pity on her and *promener* her, when *la mère* was incapable—*soulée, oui; mais soulée, soulée.* Where was she now? Ah, *dame,* who could say? She was on an evil road, a very evil road; but it was years since she had been to Mont Roselle. The gentleman's name was, *voyons donc,* what was his name? the one who was so *gentil pour la p'tite. Navré, navré,* he was, to leave her with so evil a woman; but *il n'en pouvait plus.* What was now his name? He was the second who had brought her here. *Stöqué'ss,* that was it.

"Stokes; or Stocks?" asked Mrs. Macleod.

"Stöquéss!" illuminingly repeated the porter. *"Ces noms Anglais! ce que c'est donc difficile. Stöquéss;* Stocs; *je n'en sais rien, moi. Enfin, il n'est pas revenu non plus; j'en sais pas plus long que ça. Mais la p'tite, c'était une p'tite ange."*

Madame should certainly be informed if anything more came to light, so far as he was concerned; and Rosalie would go and look for the young lady to-morrow. She would always be welcome in their little home.

Madame's card with her address concealed a *louis de dix francs;* and the gossips parted on excellent terms with each other.

"Maisie has had a lucky escape," opined Mrs. Macleod when all the above, and a good deal more of detail, had been imparted to Mrs. and Miss Stutchberry. "A vulgar, rowdy, painted, drunken, immoral harridan. That is what her mother is."

"And yet," said Miss Stutchberry, "except for her bellowing voice, she spoke like a well-bred woman; and she knew how to stand and sit and introduce herself; and she wrote educated letters in an educated hand. She must have had decent breeding somewhere. She treated us like ladies, and not like machines for educating people's daughters at so much a quarter."

"She is probably in a penitentiary now, unless she has died in some gutter," pursued Mrs. Macleod, who loved the lurid. "Maisie is well rid of her; and one of the reasons I got her the position so far away was that I last traced the woman as having been seen at Folkestone. If she is not dead or locked up, Maisie is further away from any possibility of recognition over there than if she were in England!"

"You cannot think how grateful we are to you," said Mrs. Stutchberry, with something like real emotion. "Knowing what you know, you may imagine what we felt like at the possibility of not being able to get rid of Maisie; of her sticking like a burr; and of having in the end to make some kind of communication to her . . ."

"Now, now, Rachel," said Miss Stutchberry, soothingly, and Mrs. Macleod chipped in briskly:

"Well, it is all settled comfortably now, so don't let us think of unpleasant things. How has Nellie been behaving?" And the talk wandered to other topics. But that night Mrs. Stutchberry came to her sister's room with a little account book in her hand and a mysterious document composed of dates and sums and added calculations; and with their heads close together they discussed the totals.

"Things are sure to go wrong if they can," observed the elder lady, with profound gloom, towards the close of the discussion.

"Well, no, Rachel, not always. Think of Maisie, for

instance. We might have had that drunken, painted creature coming here with the other parents and ruining the establishment. Instead, we have Maisie decently provided for, and taken off our hands, and safe. It seems almost like a special mercy that her mother deserted her."

The same sentiment was in the minds of good Rosalie and her porter, who were enchanted with the pretty blushing girl who had been their *pauv' p'tite ange chérie.* Maisie was so touched by their remembrance, so grateful for their good-will; the *réunion* was indeed a happy one. Of Madame and Monsieur Stöqué'ss they spoke guardedly, and always it was *"Pauv'e Madame, tout de même."* Maisie formed the notion that at that period her mother had been an invalid.

"Why do you always call my mother 'Madame Stocques'?" she asked ingenuously.

"Ah! *voyons,"* exclaimed the embarrassed Rosalie, looking at François in confusion. *"Ces noms Anglais, que voulez-vous? Je m'y prend. Stöqué'ss, Smeet, c'est tou'jou' la même chose. Et Plédelle! Qui dieu possible aurait pensé a ça!"*

"Faut pas y faire attention," said François, pointing to his wife with the stem of his pipe. *"Stöqué'ss, Smeet, c'est tout c'qu'elle en sait."*

But they were more careful after that, and only alluded to the absent mother as *la pauv'e dame.*

She spent her first Sunday afternoon of freedom with the worthy couple, in their quaint little garden with the *tonnelle* and the *jet d'eau,* where they had coffee and winter pears and cherry brandy. Maisie did not glean much information about her antecedents; but she obtained a good deal about the hotel and its owners.

"Pas grand chose de bon," was the verdict. Mme. Rouxel; she was a beauty! What had taken old Rouxel to marry her, who could say! And what kind of a busi-

ness was it, *dites?* It would be strange if it went on much longer like it was now. There was almost as much money lost there as at Monte Carlo; yes, and suicides too. And that lady who disappeared; *à-là-là*, that was a business. If it had not been that le *papa* Rouxel and le *Sous-préfet* were brothers-in-law, a good deal more would have been heard of that; *ah oui, par exemple.* And Mademoiselle would have care not to talk to any of those *sales messieurs* who come and offer sweets and wish to *promener* her and make *des yeux bêtes. C'est rien de bon, tout ça. Ca infecte. Et surtout se méfier* of that Swiss *demoiselle; toute l'allure d'une cocotte, celle-là.*

Maisie did not know what a *cocotte* was, and wisely forbore to ask. Her face coloured whenever she thought of her bedroom companion.

As a matter of fact, Maisie was a good deal impressed with Rosalie's admonitions; for there had already been an episode at the hotel which was causing her uneasiness. In watching the *va et vient* in the hall with an interest that never flagged, she had found herself in her turn watched. There was a big, bold-eyed, sleek-haired Belgian who hung about the lounge perpetually, and far more frequently than was at all seemly, attempted conversation with the office. On this very Sunday morning, a bunch of hothouse flowers had been placed on her desk, and the pallid male colleague had said that M. de Marinde had put them there for her.

"M. de Marinde," said the girl haughtily. "M. de Marinde is impertinent. Be so kind as to give him back his flowers. I do not take presents from strangers."

M. de Marinde had laughed quite good-temperedly when this message was delivered to him, and had strolled up to the lean, watchful Rouxel, whose bald, veined head looked like a thing that had been boiled; and had said, audibly, *"Elle est difficile, la p'tite Anglaise. Présente-moi, hein?"*

"Faire l'introduction?" grinned Rouxel, advancing in quick comprehension to the office bar. *"Mademoiselle Plédelle, permettez que je vous présente Monsieur le Comte de Marinde."*

M. de Marinde showed his white teeth in an ingratiating smile and offered his flowers. "You would not accept these from a stranger, Mademoiselle; but you will not refuse them now that I am an acquaintance."

His English was quite fluent.

Maisie was furious.

"In my country, *les gens bien-élevés* do not offer presents like that; nor do well-conducted women look on them as anything but an insult," she retorted, in the very best vein of her favourite heroines.

The Count bowed.

Rouxel said something under his moustache, but M. de Marinde interrupted him quickly.

"Mais non, mais non; tais-toi, grand imbécile. Laisse-moi faire. Elle est adorable."

And he strolled off laughing.

Maisie was quite conscious that he had followed her that afternoon, and might even be hanging about to join her on the way home. So she was glad of Rosalie's leisurely escort and voluble chatter; and felt that earning one's living was not, in some aspects, the glorious adventure it appeared.

CHAPTER V

CHEZ LE PAPA ROUXEL

MAISIE had been seven months at Mont Roselle. Her looks had improved and her character steadied. Also her eyes had been considerably opened. She knew the Hôtel de la Côte, now, for what it was. She was sometimes a little afraid, her knowledge was so clear. M. de Marinde came and went and came again, patiently stalking her; and Rouxel, whose impulse had been to tell her sternly that he could not have good customers offended, left her alone, evidently by arrangement.

Other customers had noticed the pretty English girl. There were one or two laughing, chaffing young men, with whom she established a sort of armed friendliness, and who offered boxes of sweets without offence. There was an elderly man, back from Johannesburg, who without any preparation whatever, asked her to marry him. So long as he was in the hotel she felt safe; but after he left her apprehensions returned. There was something in the way that Rouxel looked, in the way that the Swiss girl laughed, that filled her with alarm. She longed to get away, but was afraid she would not be allowed to go.

Then M. de Marinde came back once more. This time he seemed less inclined to patience and pressed his attentions odiously. Rouxel was short with her; and she had a horrible fear that some accusation would be lodged against her and made an excuse for turning her out; and then M. de Marinde's chance would come.

Maisie had written, in answer to advertisements, to several other hotels, in the hope of getting away from Mont Roselle. Unfortunately, the hotel world is a very

close preserve, and Rouxel knew what she was doing as soon as she had made the first application. One day he spoke of it.

"You desire to leave, Mademoiselle Plédelle?"

"Yes," answered Maisie; adding, "I will not stay here to be annoyed by your M. de Marinde."

"Very well," said Rouxel. "Then, if you will permit me, out of regard for Madame Macleod, I will do my best to assist you to suit yourself. You understand I cannot choose my *clientèle,* and business is business; but I do not wish you to be annoyed."

Maisie could not but marvel at the change of tone, and thought she had done well to speak out boldly. The Swiss girl reported, however, that Rouxel and de Marinde had held a confidential chat in the Manager's private room, and had seemed pleased with whatever decision they had come to. Maisie felt nervous and worried.

She had not written to Mrs. Macleod about her troubles, partly because she did not like to seem dissatisfied with what that good friend had arranged, and partly —in greater part—because she could not bring herself to own that she could not look after herself. It sounded so silly to say she was afraid of those two men. So she wrote nothing, and de Marinde went about with an amused face and did not attempt to speak to her; and Rouxel gravely consulted her about placing her at the Hôtel des Alpes, Challenges, where the proprietor was a cousin of his wife's.

"It is a quiet family hotel," he explained, "of the old pattern. You will not be annoyed there."

Maisie accepted gratefully; and Rouxel replied that he would make arrangements for the journey.

When Maisie mentioned this to the Swiss colleague, she grinned malevolently.

"Do you know Challenges?" she asked.

Maisie shook her head.

"Do you know whether there is any Hôtel des Alpes there?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I wouldn't be such an innocent as you, not for anything in the world!"

"Do you think there is not such a hotel?" The girl grinned and shrugged her shoulders and turned out her hands. "What shall I do? How am I to find out?"

"Why not write to the *Commissaire de Police?*"

Maisie wrote. But the *Commissaire* referred the matter to the *Commissaire* at Mont Roselle, and that official handed it on to the *Sous-préfet,* who was Rouxel's brother-in-law. Maisie heard no more of it.

"Perhaps there is no such place as Challenges!" suggested Marie-Reine, with fiendish glee.

Rosalie and her husband, however, answered for Challenges. It was a lonely spot, pretty but difficult of access. The Hôtel des Alpes? They shook their heads dubiously. It was a very little place; it hardly seemed likely that any hotel there would keep an office staff.

Plunged in extreme uncertainty, Maisie wrote to Mrs. Macleod. That good lady wrote reassuringly to her *protégée* and angrily to Rouxel; and the latter, who had honestly believed that Maisie was a person whose guardians were anxious to be rid of, went about with an evil frown and spoke curtly to his precious client and co-rascal, de Marinde. His temper was unbearable; but Maisie felt safer.

* * * * *

"There is that precious *Count,*" said Marie-Reine, one day, with an emphasis on the "Count" that was wholly disrespectful.

"Which count?" asked Maisie, anxiously, afraid to look round. Counts, for her, meant de Marinde.

"The Count Baba," replied Marie-Reine, pronouncing the name with infinite scorn.

"*Baba?*" incredulously.

"Or Dada. I can't remember which. They are either each ridiculous. What an object!"

The Count with the absurd name had an equally absurd appearance. He was tubby and stout, but had very sloping shoulders. His nose occupied too much of his face; his cheeks seemed to come down to his collar and reach after his vanishing shoulders. He wore a white waistcoat, and a hat too small for him, which he cocked on one side to look rakish. It did not, however, look rakish. It only looked on one side. He was making an incredible fuss, to impress the fact of his arrival on all concerned.

"Ah! *et nous, maintenant!*" said Marie-Reine, in an undertone. "*Animal mal-élevé, va!*"

Having spread himself to his satisfaction in the hall, the tubby man approached the office. The same suite he had last year? Yes, certainly. No, visitors never have damp sheets in the Hôtel de la Côte; M. le Comte knows that. Certainly he shall not be waked to look at the sunrise, if he does not wish to see it. His letters would be brought to him always. *Ça se faisait toujours.* Was there anything else Monsieur le Comte desired?

"*Sale bête,*" ejaculated the coarse-tongued Marie-Reine, as he lounged away, staring hard at Maisie. "Now you will have him as well as Marinde; and I daresay they will have rows. Papa Rouxel will have his hands occupied."

"Is the Count Baba another of that kind?" asked worried Maisie.

"Dada," corrected Marie-Reine. "*Mais oui. Tout ce qu'il y a de plus coureur.*"

"Is he Dada, or Baba?" asked Maisie, with some heat, busying herself with books and entries.

"How should I know?" retorted Marie-Reine; adding, "and he is not really a count, either. He says he has a title in his country that is the equal of count in this. *A-t-on-jamais-entendu-chose-pareille?*"

"What is his country?"

"The land of Israel." Then, laughing at Maisie's astonished face, "Or Syria; or somewhere thereabouts. Libanus; Sinai: *I* don't know where! Either each is just as likely."

As Marie-Reine was in the habit of saying the most audacious and unfounded things about all the clients of the Hôtel de la Côte, Maisie took little notice of her *chronique scandaleux* except so far as the new comer's habits were concerned. She did not want a repetition of the de Marinde affair, feeling that one such imbroglio at a time was as much as she was equal to.

Rouxel answered Mrs. Macleod's angry letter with much discretion. He was greatly honoured at hearing from Madame, but deeply perplexed by her communication. He could think of nothing that could have given her occasion so to rebuke him. He trusted very much that Mademoiselle Plédelle, her *protégée,* was not going to add to her already great inaptitude for business, the habit of imagining things about the frequenters of the hotel. It would be well if Mademoiselle could be brought to understand that the world was a place for work and business, and not for high romance. She must not allow her thoughts to be guided by writers of fiction, but try to understand realities. With a little more application to her duties and less to her fancies, she would be more useful, it was to be hoped, in her position than it was possible to consider her at present.

Mrs. Macleod frowned over the letter; and then wrote warningly to Maisie; but her warnings were unfortunately so phrased that Maisie took alarm, and offence. She felt that if it were going to be a tussle between herself and

Rouxel, if her word were to be pitted and weighed against his, it would be the last measure of her humiliation; and she resolved to bear anything rather than complain again to Mrs. Macleod. Nevertheless her position was becoming most difficult. Rouxel was no longer indulgent; he was barely civil. On every possible occasion he found fault with her, and held her up to ridicule. Nothing she could do was right; and she became so nervous under perpetual rebuke that she was unable to do herself justice. It began to be apparent to Marie-Reine, who lost no time in imparting the idea to Maisie, that it was Rouxel's plan to dismiss her as incompetent and impossible to recommend elsewhere. Maisie's days and nights were haunted by the dread of it and by the shamed consciousness that she had been worsted in her first encounter with the world she had set out to conquer.

De Marinde, watching Rouxel's methods with grim amusement, was not long in discovering that he had a rival. The tubby and self-assertive Dada (or Baba) had no hesitation in advertising his own sentiments; and while de Marinde was beyond question the most personable of the two, Dada (or Baba) was undoubtedly the more able. Having beguiled the elfish Marie-Reine into admitting that de Marinde's attentions had caused trouble, the other assumed the attitude of a protector of beauty in distress; and on one or two occasions intervened so very much to the purpose that Maisie was actually grateful to him in spite of her distrust. She was beginning to look on men with horror, as creatures of malice and ill-doing.

Marie-Reine enjoyed the whole affair hugely. She kept Maisie in torment by her mocking indiscretions and her gross pleasantries. Maisie was also pretty sure that one or two awkward incidents and "accidental" *rencontres* were of her arranging. It became more and more difficult to shake off the two men. one or the other of whom

seemed to be always hanging about. Once they quarrelled openly; and Rouxel, who promptly laid the blame on her, declared that if it happened again she must leave.

De Marinde took the first opportunity of speaking to her, and asking whether it were true that Rouxel had threatened to dimiss her. He, of course, knew it already from Rouxel himself.

"It is of no business of yours," said Maisie, coldly.

He devoured her with bold eyes, and smiled at her scorn.

"How can you allow that fat Jew-boy to talk to you?" he asked presently.

"What do I care," burst out Maisie, indignantly, "which of you is Jew and which is Gentile? The trouble is that neither of you is a gentleman. A Jew cad is no worse than—any other kind of cad."

The Baron's face darkened. He was angry, at last. Marie-Reine was exultant, when Maisie told her how he looked.

"Aha!" she chanted. "You have made him now your *ennemie*. He will never forgive you that. I wonder what he will do for to venge himself. I will like to see."

Maisie was terrified at her calculating glee.

CHAPTER VI

THE END OF THE QUEST

MONT ROSELLE had its summer and its winter season. The winter season was catered for not only with the ice and snow sports so dear to the heart of the Briton in Switzerland, but with a casino and a good deal of gambling. It had a heavy reputation for play.

The Count Dada (or Baba) had made all arrangements for an exciting winter. He could not afford to to live at the Hôtel de la Côte; but he had come there to win, so as to be able to afford both. He was settling down to work, so to speak, and preparing for his campaign; and a contemplated change from one side of the hotel to a more convenient suite gave him an excuse for hanging about the office and Maisie. For some minutes Maisie had not answered any of his remarks.

"Well, will it be all right about my suite?" he asked, at last, in loud and aggressive tones.

"Yes, Monsieur Dada," answered Maisie, equally aggressive.

"Baba," corrected the Count.

Maisie went into a fit of unrestrained laughter. Her laugh was a very pretty one, low and infinitely infectious, and with a queer little catch in it that seemed to express a world of humorous appreciation. She stopped rather suddenly, seeing two ladies, who were sitting near a table of guide books and papers, turn and stare at her with deliberation.

"Shall you tell them the joke?" asked Marie-Reine, mischievously, with the intention of setting her off again.

But Maisie, abashed and red in the face, bent over her typing machine and turned her back both on the staring ladies and the inconvenient Count. The latter presently took himself off.

Maisie glanced now and again at the ladies, feeling uncomfortably that they had considered her conduct ill-bred. They appeared to be jotting down addresses, and took no further notice of her. Presently they began to talk over what they had noted down.

"That will do, Rips," said the younger one; "we ought to be able to find something suitable out of that lot."

What was it that struck with such familiarity on Maisie's listening ear?

"If we don't, we can come back, that's all," yawned the older one, leaning back and stretching one cramped arm. "It's a more difficult job than one thinks, as soon as one sets about it."

She spoke while yawning, and her voice rose without restraint. Maisie listened transfixed.

"Is there a waiter anywhere? Here, *garçon;* can we have tea served here? Tea for two, with cream. *Surtout, n'oubliez pas la crême, ein?"*

Maisie hung on the speaker's words in a kind of dream. The name "Rips," the over-loud voice, the yawn and the manner, the demand for cream; where had she heard them all before?

"I must get up and have a stretch," continued the noisy woman, suiting the action to the word. "Here, Lola, let's have our tea here, where we can see the passing world and the view as well. I like the world better than the view, on the whole. There's more variety."

The other woman joined her.

"It hasn't changed a bit outside, this place," pursued the chatterer, her voice getting louder and louder. "It is all just the same except this hotel. There used to be nothing but the Bonhomme inn, just think of it! Fancy

staying at the Bonhomme now!" And she laughed a grating laugh, which Maisie now remembered perfectly. The quest was at an end.

Maisie's heart beat furiously. A swirl of ideas dashed round her brain, jostling each other and dazing her. She started forward, and then drew back. She turned hot and then cold, but was conscious that her cheeks were blazing. Hardly knowing what she did, she left the office and stood by a tall palm, pausing until the waiter had brought the tea. Then she walked up to the little group at the table, with spots and rings dancing before her eyes and a loud singing in her ears.

The two women looked at her carelessly and then more keenly. It was evident that she had something to say and that she had difficulty in saying it. Her good looks struck them forcibly. Something else struck one of them. She rose slowly, with the tea-pot still in her hand, looking, looking, doubting . . . fearing.

"Are you Mrs. Richard Pleydell?" asked Maisie's well-bred voice. It sounded far away and inconsequent, to her. She felt dizzy, battered.

"Well?" responded the older woman, half defiantly. And then: "Suppose I am?"

"Mamma," said Maisie, almost under her breath, pleadingly, uncertain.

"Don't make a scene," said Mrs. Pleydell, tartly but low-voice too.

They stood looking at each other in silence. It was the stranger who spoke first.

"Do sit down, Rips," she said; and Mrs. Pleydell sat down still holding the tea-pot.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in the same tart but subdued voice. "Are you here alone?"

Her meaning struck home to Maisie's understanding. She could not quell the rush of blood which shot that astonishing flood of scarlet over her cheeks and fore-

head; but she took no other notice of the affront.

"I have been here nearly a year," she replied coldly. "I am employed in the manager's office."

"It was you, just now; laughing . . . I heard you. No mistake about your being your father's daughter; I thought for the moment . . ."

What she had thought she did not say; but turned away and proceeded to pour out tea. Maisie stood irresolute, her heart hardening, all her dreams in a heap at her feet.

The young woman called Lola saved the situation.

"She had better come round this evening," she purred. "We can't talk things out here, dearie, there's lots you have got to hear, and your mother too. You come round to-night, any time after eight, *Appartements Brindejonc, La Petite Place, au deuxième.* Then we can have a lovely chat, and hear all about each other; isn't that so, Rips?"

Mrs. Pleydell, uncertain of her ground and most anxious to avoid unpleasantness in public, smiled beamingly, and laughed too.

"What an outpouring it will be!" she cried, brazenly, yet cautiously, for all that. She was thoroughly on her guard. "One wouldn't believe it, if it were in a book. We will expect you, then, Maisie; and I hope you have not done anything to make your poor mother ashamed of you. Give me a kiss, child, if no one is looking!"

Maisie kissed her mother's uplifted cheek. It was velvet-soft and deliciously scented, and helped to throw her into more confusion of thought and feeling. The face itself was comely, the hair a soft grey with a pretty ripple in it, crowned by a very handsome and becoming picture hat. Black and white, with a discreet adjustment here and there of old rose, was the scheme of the costume to which the hat gave an elegant finish. No one could have wished for a more presentable parent. If it were not for that voice, and that hard, almost vulgar manner, Maisie

could have showered all the old love on her. But what a reception! Was it possible that she was *not glad* Maisie had found her? Maisie's heart swelled and ached, and her eyes were sore with repressed tears.

The two ladies did not dawdle over their teas. They were, indeed, in haste to be gone, and made their way back to the *Appartements Brindejonc* in almost complete silence. Lola followed her friend into a small bedroom, and began, like her, to take off gloves, veil, hat and brooches, and to undo her dress. Presently they were in wadded Japanese dressing-gowns and sprawling, the one across the bed, the other on the sofa. They lit cigarettes and for some time smoked in silence.

"I expect it is rather a facer, eh, Rips?" came from Lola, at last, between long puffs of smoke. She watched the smoke, not her friend's face, but was devoured with curiosity despite her nonchalant bearing.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather," declared Mrs. Pleydell, in tones far too jovial to be genuine.

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, chuck it, Lola; for God's sake don't chatter. I must think it out and see what can be done."

Lola lay on her back and blew smoke into the air.

"What on earth am I to tell her?" queried the Missing Parent, fretfully. "Fancy her turning up here, of all places!"

"Depends on what kind of a girl she is," said Lola, lazily. "She is handsome; no mistake about that; but she doesn't look *your* sort."

"How do you mean, 'not my sort'?" snapped Mrs. Pleydell, inclined to be quarrelsome.

"Hard, and knowing, and business-like," replied Lola, promptly. "Looks as if she would swallow a lot. Look here, Rips, she would be a big attraction . . ."

There was a long pause.

"She would cut you out," remarked Mrs. Pleydell, coarsely.

"Don't be an ass, Rips. We are not out for love and kisses. Hadn't you better tell me all about it? Of course, I don't want to poke my nose into your affairs; but this might make things awkward for us here, and we had better fix up some yarn that will be believed."

"One doesn't know how much she knows," complained Maisie's parent, querulously. "That is really where the difficulty comes in. I don't know how much she remembers. She is sure to remember the Marquis, and very likely she remembers Ozzy. Perhaps that was why she came here! What a beastly thought."

She twisted her shoulders uneasily.

"Does she know about the row, and the reason?"

"How the devil can I tell what she knows? She was with us when Ozzy found us . . . they arranged between them that she was to go to the Convent, and I did not see her again except to say good-bye until I came out of the Home. Of course, I did not talk of anything she was likely to remember, when I did see her. I remember she made things excessively pleasant, that time she came to say good-bye, by asking all the time for Baptiste, Baptiste. Such a song."

"And when did you see her last?"

"Oh goodness, Lola, don't cross-examine like that! How can I remember? It is ever so long. The damnable ill-luck of her turning up . . . there is absolutely nothing I would not have had happen, sooner."

"But why, Rips? It doesn't seem so awful——"

"Oh! Doesn't it? That is all you know! And anyway, I don't want her. I don't want her mixed up in things. Those two men; they both were dotty about her . . ."

Mrs. Pleydell's edifying reminiscences ended in a sigh.

"Never saw either of them again?"

Rips' disreputable old head wagged in a gloomy negative, and there was silence for a space.

"Awful brutes, men," observed Lola, after a space.

"I don't know whether I could really say that, Lola, you know," objected Rips, thoughtfully. "Her father was, of course. What a hound that man was! By heaven, how I hated him! But when he came that awful cropper, he wrote and told me he was sorry about me, because he had been going to divorce me and let me marry Ozzy . . . I can't get over that. It was an awful knock. And Ozzy would have married me all right; he stuck to me long after any other man would have given it up, and he paid up for Maisie like a brick. It cost a lot; it was a top-hole place, that school. Funny, how those two men went on about the child. Baptiste was just as bad. Baptiste . . . I'd sooner have had Baptiste than any man in the world; I'd have gone to hell and back for him. And Ozzy never forgave that; and I never forgave him. What rot it all is. Life! Such a fraud. He wouldn't stay; wouldn't hear of it, when he found Ozzy had first claim; and then Ozzy wouldn't stay on account of him! Aren't men odd? They never think a husband has any claim at all; he is fair game. But a lover . . . that is serious."

Once more her eloquence ran out, and Lola was no nearer knowing what had finally parted mother and daughter. She yawned and stretched, lazily; and tried another feeler.

"Does the girl know why you left her?"

"I don't know what she knows; haven't I told you? Ozzy made me go into the Inebriate Home, else he would have cut us off altogether; and I don't know what she was told, and never asked. When he died, it was so sudden, he had made no provision for either of us; and I was left with nothing. You know the straits I was put to. And those two men were good to me; and they wanted her to

have a chance. I haven't got much of a conscience, and I played the fool all round, I know—I was an unmentionable fool; but when drink gets hold of you, there it is. Everything goes. But when I had shaken it off, I just felt that they had been decent all through, and I would do that for them, keep her out of my kind of life. Funny, isn't it? I hated her father. Good God, how I hated that man! And she is his child. But I would do things for her, for the sake of those men who were not her father . . ."

"You deserted her out of pure goodness of heart, to please them . . . ?"

Lola was immensely interested and amused.

Rips laughed too, and shook off her sentimental mood. "Well, not exactly, perhaps. But I knew those school people were well-bred people and all that, and I thought they would keep her on the chance of my turning up again and settling with them. I simply couldn't have trailed the girl about. What could I have done with her? And if I had written to say I couldn't pay, they would have sent her to me at once! And you know how difficult things were . . . I did write to Baptiste."

"Did you?" sitting bolt upright. "And . . . ?"

"He sent the money like a shot. He was always like that, even after he married that porpoise of a Russian. But it was just then that the Richmond affair turned up, and you couldn't manage the price . . . I always meant to send the school some of the money; but it slipped away . . . there were so many things, and then there was your illness; and you looked such an awful wreck. It just went; and I was ashamed to write to Baptiste again. So I just tried not to think about it. It is the very devil, her turning up."

There was a long silence, during which Lola was conscious of fancying that there was something more behind

Rips' deep objection to her daughter's presence than she had owned.

"So we are jointly responsible," she said at last, lightly. "Well, we must fake some yarn she will swallow. She has the trusting face, so it won't be very difficult, and we must avoid a scandal here at all costs. We'll see it through together, Rips old dear. Don't worry."

"It is easy to say, 'Don't worry,' " grumbled Rips old dear.

"We will let her tell her own story first, and that will show us how much she knows; and then pretend that you had heard some scandal about her, that she had bolted from the school, or something like that, and that she was dead to her mother, like in the books we read when we were young. And when we have settled the whole thing we will have her here."

"Have her here?" ejaculated Mrs. Pleydell, startled. "I don't want her here! Besides," dubiously, "perhaps she will not come. What in the world do you want her here for?"

Poor Maisie was at a great disadvantage when she appeared that evening. Her quiet composed manner gave no idea of the storm that was raging within. Doubt and suspicion, anger and hurt affection, offended dignity —one feeling after another held sway. She took refuge in a proud silence, taking the seat her mother arranged for her, and letting herself be kissed, her hat and gloves taken from her, her shining hair stroked and admired. Had Mrs. Pleydell been a really underbred woman, she would undoubtedly have bungled it; but she fingered the jangling chords deftly, and gradually Maisie thawed.

As she sipped her coffee, she began to take in what her mother was hinting at.

"A year; nearly a whole year in Mont Roselle! And all alone?"

"Yes," said Maisie, in steely tones.

"But, my dear one, I do not understand. Why?"

"Because I was earning my living," replied Maisie, with cold pride. She would not admit that she understood her mother's meaning.

"But I cannot understand, Maisie. Why were you earning your own living, and in this place—in a rather questionable hotel in a fast *milieu?*"

"I had to," repeated Maisie, stubbornly. "The place was found for me."

"But by whom?"

"By the lady who had me trained for business, Mrs. Macleod. She was a friend of Mrs. Stutchberry's."

"I am still at sea, my child. Why did Mrs. Stutchberry's friends interfere? Where do they come in, anyway? Did you go back to them?"

Maisie was the one who was at sea, by this time; and her soul was consumed with indignation. Did her mother want to force her to throw down the gauntlet, to say to her, "You deserted me, I was living on charity, I had no alternative!" She felt that she could not say the words, and yet that she would be forced to it. She looked her mother steadily in the face, her own no longer scarlet, but white.

"I could not stay to live on Mrs. Stutchberry's charity," she said, in a choking voice. "As you . . . when you . . . as you could not afford to pay any more for my schooling, I had to work. It was very generous of them to keep me so long and to train me for business."

"Let me try to keep my senses!" exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, with a fine appearance of distraction. "Do you mean to tell me that you stayed on at Mrs. Stutchberry's, and that you were not paid for—that you did not run away with a man you had picked up, and get married to him without permission? My brain is reeling!"

So was Maisie's.

"Run away and get married," she repeated, stupefied. *"I!"*

"That was what I heard," said Mrs. Pleydell, with an assumption of patient resignation until the mystery should be cleared up; while Lola nodded an emphatic head several times in confirmation.

"Who said so?"

"A man I knew, who knew the man he said you had married."

"What was his name?"

"Which? The man I knew, or the man you married?"

"I didn't marry anyone! How could anyone have invented such nonsense? Was that what you meant, at the hotel, when you asked if I was there alone?"

Mrs. Pleydell had not meant that in the least, but she nodded assent, and the colour flamed again in Maisie's cheeks, remembering what it was she had thought was meant.

"You can imagine, Maisie, believing that, that your mother could not be expected to give you a very warm reception when you turned up so suddenly. To have thought all this time, that you had gone off with a strange man, and never troubled to write your mother a line, nor to tell her if you were all right, nor seem to care if she was alive or dead; it did look rather bad, didn't it?"

"But why did you not write to Mrs. Stutchberry, mamma?"

"I did write!" cried that injured person, "immediately I heard. Of course I wrote. But I got no answer, and concluded that she did not choose to face her responsibility in the matter. And then I had a very serious illness, and all my anxieties helped to make it worse. I all but died. But for Lola here, I should have died. It was you saved me, wasn't it, Lola? And then as you never wrote, I thought you wanted to cast your poor

mother off for good; and I had not the heart to go on with the search."

Maisie was no match for these two good players who tossed the ball of fancy so lightly from one to the other. She was dazed, but partly reconciled. That there were discrepancies, and carelessness, she dimly saw and realized; but on the whole she was mollified, though mystified. Truly, life was much more exciting than story-books; only excitement did not *feel* nice, however nice it might sound.

"Now tell us all about your work, dear child. Is that hotel a good place for you to be in? It has rather a fast reputation. Do they treat you well?"

Maisie tried to collect her wandering wits and to give a coherent account of her occupation and surroundings. She was blessed with a sense of the comic, and her listeners were easy people to talk to—easily amused, interested in silly little details, and full of understanding comment. Maisie went from one thing to another, lured on by their curiosity and excitement, and even got off a description, with hot face and shy tongue, of Marie-Reine's bedroom behaviour; at which her mother laughed until the tears poured down her cheeks, and Maisie laughed too, for the first time. It had never seemed comic before.

Finally, after telling them about the rival Counts, and how she had been pestered, she got off an account of how she was to have gone to a hotel that did not exist, and how she had got into Rouxel's bad books. Mrs. Pleydell's face darkened, and the bellowing voice, that had so upset Mrs. Stutchberry, became extremely noticeable. She used some very forcible language in loud tones, about Rouxel, and appeared to have some knowledge of her own of de Marinde.

"Hounds," she called them.

Maisie's explanation of her burst of laughter that af-

ternoon, which had first attracted Mrs. Pleydell's attention, caused by the inextricable confusion in Count Baba's name—"Even now, I really can't be quite sure which it is," she declared—was highly popular. The Missing Parent entered heartily into all such jokes; and the evening ended in great good fellowship, in spite of sundry lapses from good taste on the part of Lola.

"We must get you out of that place as soon as we can," said Mrs. Pleydell, in her shouting voice. "You can't stay there to be hunted down by these filthy men. Give notice to-morrow, dearie, and come to us as soon as you can get away. We are looking for more convenient quarters; this is too small and high up; we want something *au premier*. The people downstairs can't make up their minds if they are going or staying, otherwise we would take their *appartement*. The *Petite Place* is the pick of the town, really."

"Was that what you were looking for in the guide books to-day?" asked Maisie; and Mrs. Pleydell answered "Yes."

"Shall I ask Rosalie?" she ventured.

"And who is Rosalie?"

"Don't you remember her, mamma? She was where we used to go, to the Auberge Bonhomme, when you came here before. She remembers you quite well."

Mrs. Pleydell shot a scared glance at Lola.

"She married the fat porter who shouts 'M-o-o-ont Ro*selle!*' and they remember me as a little girl, and they have been such dears. I go there sometimes on Sundays, and they always give me such good advice, it is as good as going to church! They will be so glad to hear we have found each other."

"Tell me where to find them, dearie, and I will go and thank them for being good to my girlie."

When Maisie got back to the hotel the unpleasantness of her position was brought home to her very forcibly.

The manageress gave her a severe rating for being ten minutes late, and Rouxel, coming by at the moment, added a few cutting remarks about neglected work. Marie-Reine was in a disgusting mood, and told her in gross language of a scandal that had been unearthed in the hotel and the means Rouxel was adopting to hush it up. She also said that de Marinde had been drunk and had cried in the smoking room.

Maisie put her head under the clothes to shut it all out.

All the next day she tried to screw up her courage to the point of giving Rouxel notice. It was the more difficult because of the distrust she could not help feeling of the *ménage* in the *Appartements Brindejonc* and the queer story they had put her off with. It did not ring in the least true, the more she thought of it the odder it seemed. Did she want to live with them, or did she not? What kind of pepole were they, really? Was she pleased, or disappointed, with her mother? For the life of her she could not tell.

When evening came, not only de Marinde, but *Baba* too was drunk; or, at least, showed signs of having been drinking. On her way to bed she met them, arm in arm, in momentary maudlin friendship. They tried to stop her, and the little man suddenly remembering his rôle of protector, clasped his arms round her in an effort to draw her away from de Marinde. De Marinde stumbled, and nearly fell on them.

Maisie shook off the detaining hands, and walked without hesitation to the nearest door, at which she knocked and then opened it. Her hands and voice were both shaking.

"Je vous prie, Monsieur . . . ces messieurs se conduisent . . . je vous prie de m'abriter un petit moment . . ." The tipsy men laughed as the elderly gentleman appeared in the doorway, towering over angry Maisie; and the elderly man's wife rang the bell loudly.

There was much loud talking, and expostulation, and argumentation; and finally Rouxel appeared on the scene.

"Ah! *C'est encore vous,* Mademoiselle. I might have been sure of it." He spoke icily, and Maisie's blood rose.

"It is not I, Monsieur Rouxel, but these *voyoux* whom you accumulate on your premises, which should be closed by the police. Will you be good enough to take notice that I leave your employment in twenty-four hours, and will Monsieur here," turning to the elderly gentleman, "witness for me that I give notice because of the disgusting behaviour of some of the habitual clients of the hotel? I go to my mother from here, and she will know what to do if you dare to take my character away and pretend that *my* conduct had anything to do with all this unpleasantness."

Maisie was in a red-hot passion and spoke her mind bravely.

"*C'est bien dit,* Mademoiselle," cried the elderly gentleman's sympathetic wife. "I, too, have seen, and others as well, how you have been annoyed by *ces types.*" She glared at Rouxel in Amazonian fury, and had to be calmed down by her husband in the same way as the argumentative Counts.

Next day Maisie packed her things and removed herself, bag and baggage, to the *Appartements Brindejonc.*

CHAPTER VII

THE *APPARTEMENT* IN THE *PETITE PLACE*

HAVING burnt her boats in a fit of anger, Maisie tried to put out of her mind the disquieting knowledge that her mother had told a most unconvincing story. She did not doubt that Mrs. Pleydell had heard something of the nature of the story she had repeated; but as Maisie figured it out, she was quite sure her mother had never written that letter to Mrs. Stutchberry. It was not a pleasant thought, and she put it from her, never asking at any time who it was who had informed her mother of the supposed elopement. Mrs. Pleydell, on the other hand, was only too glad to have the subject done with, and did not refer to it either; while Lola, in much amusement, opined that Maisie was too much of a fool to live; unless, as was sometimes the case, she suspected her of being deeper than any of them knew.

For three or four days after getting into her new quarters, Maisie slept on a sofa and washed in the kitchen; then, the people downstairs having suddenly decided to leave, a joyous and noisy *déménagement* was made to the flat *au premier*. There were three bedrooms, and for the first time in her life Maisie enjoyed the luxury of a room to herself. It was only a tiny affair, but the business of arranging it for herself, to her own taste, gave the girl intense delight. She learned to play bridge, to smoke cigarettes, and to call her mother Mumsie instead of mamma. Mrs. Pleydell and Lola had only elementary notions of housekeeping; so the "domestic science" was trotted out and Maisie was entrusted

with the management of the establishment; her system being so soundly economical that the extra person to provide for did not show in the accounts. She also engaged Rosalie to do the heavy work, for a few hours every day; and the freedom from restraint in the happy-go-lucky atmosphere created by "Rips," the knowledge that she was useful, and the happy absence of Counts, made this questionable establishment seem a very haven of delight. Inconvenient doubts were relegated to the background of her mind; inconvenient questions were stifled.

"Eh b'en, Madame," said the beaming Rosalie, *"êtes-vous pas bien, avec une belle grande demoiselle comme ça pour vous t'nir compagnie?* Things go better now, *ein?"*

This in a manner full of mystery and innuendo.

"How much does she know?" asked Mrs. Pleydell.

"La p'tite? Mais rien. Rien de rien. N'a pas idée. And now it is finished, is it not? *On se range,* and all goes *comme sur des roulettes. C'est moi et François qui sont content de voir tout ça s'arranger si proprement, va."*

The good creature was really full of joy, her only regret being that *ce pauv'e* M. Stöqué'ss was not there to see how blissful it all was.

It was with difficulty that Rosalie refrained from using the tell-tale name Stöqué'ss, and substituting Plédelle; and indeed, it was almost as foreign to its owner as to her acquaintances. Save for the brief period of comparative respectability, when she had left the stage, lived at Camberley with her husband, bore him a child, and visited Paris in his company; and lived for a few months after his disappearance in an atmosphere of sympathetic indignation among his friends; she had always been known by her stage name. Her retirement from public life under the influence of *ce bon* M. Stöqué'ss, and her subsequent brief reappearance as Mrs. Pleydell,

had covered her tracks from her creditors; and the trail had been still further obliterated by her ventures in company with Lola, under the name of Mount, which they shared impartially. With her hair, complexion, and figure drastically altered and toned down, there was nothing to connect fashionable and elegant Mrs. Pleydell with dashing, slashing Meta Rippingsley, who had come such an unholy cropper and owed money everywhere.

Lola's was the guiding brain; but Mrs. Pleydell was quick to take an idea and develop it. Both saw the advantage of complete severance from their past; both saw the value of a domestic *ménage* and the romantic glamour shed by the presence of the pretty, fresh-faced, long-lost and newly-found daughter. And while Rips old dear nursed her queer scruples and brooded over her obligations to her bygone lovers, she also had a queerer feeling of loyalty to Lola which forbade her to fling away, for unfamiliar scruples and principles, an asset that bade fair to be a rich one. Yet, her heart misgave her and she presaged ill-luck.

Maisie was never taken to the Casino, nor to any of the pleasure resorts which her mother and Lola frequented. So she had no knowledge of the way in which the acquaintances were made who afterwards called at the *Appartement Brindejonc* and spent evenings there. Bridge, and other games were played; but in these, too, she was never invited to take a hand. Sometimes after these evenings, loud altercation would take place, and what Lola described as a slanging match indulged in, between the strangely assorted partners; and these episodes gave Maisie a dreadful feeling of unhappiness and insecurity while they lasted. Next day, however, all would be smiling and serene, and the housekeeping money paid over to her as usual; the bond, compounded of mutual gratitude and mutual interest, which held the

two together, being apparently strong enough to survive the most violent shocks.

Maisie sometimes let her mind wander to the days which seemed so far away and unreal, when the Young Gentlewomen made impudent merriment over the "great bond between them" to which the Sisters Stutchberry alluded in snobbishly sentimental terms, exploiting it unscrupulously for business purposes. The bond between Mumsie and Lola was a very real one; but they never alluded to it, nor told her how it had been forged. Had she but known how large a part her unpaid school fees had played in it, the *Appartement Brindejonc* would not have seemed such a desirable haven.

In that same matter of the school fees, Maisie had some difficult moments; but at last spoke to her mother on the subject. It was doubtful, for one wild instant, whether the result would not be a furious outbreak of rage; but Mrs. Pleydell smothered it down and smiled brightly on Maisie.

"I ought to have thought of that before," she cried. "Are you writing to the dear old things? Tell them I will settle up next time my remittances come in, if they will let me know the full amount. And tell them how grateful I am, and how sorry for making such a mistake."

Maisie's heart beat joyfully. It was fortunate she could not see into her mother's!

The unforeseen coincidence which brought her deserted daughter to Mont Roselle at this particular juncture was looked upon by Mrs. Pleydell as altogether unfortunate. To have changed her plans just then and to have sought other winter quarters would have upset some very carefully calculated schemes; and neither her pocket nor her projects would bear the alteration. On the other hand, it would equally ill have suited her to turn a deaf ear to Maisie and to have the scandal of her own conduct bandied about by hotel keepers and

customers; and, perhaps, even by the police—who could tell! So she had made the best of a bad job; Lola had been sharp enough to see that the girl might be useful, being so good-looking; and in the meantime she was indeed being useful in most unexpected ways, for Maisie was a born as well as a trained housekeeper, and kept the little *appartement* more trim, dainty, and comfortable than "Rips" could ever remember to have been in her life. The table always looked exquisitely fresh, there were always flowers about; the few possessions, pooled by the little party for common use, were arranged to the utmost advantage and effect; and the gay, bright presence of the young girl, with the prestige their relationship gave to the household, was an invaluable asset. The *clientèle* of the Hôtel de la Côte, to whom Marie-Reine detailed Maisie's romantic history, with adornments of her own, were duly impressed; and the townspeople and tradesmen vastly gratified in that the interesting event should have occurred at Mont Roselle. Very different, *va,* from the kind of things that generally happened *chez le Papa Rouxel!*

Mrs. Pleydell's sentiment for Maisie was, as she had already stated, purely vicarious. Two men who had been good to her, on whom she had lavished illicit and unrestrained passion to her own undoing, had been concerned for the welfare of the little daughter whose father she had hated. On their account she had a soft place for the girl; but on Maisie's own account she felt nothing but discomfort.

She did not pretend to understand her daughter. Had she been vicious or unscrupulous, it would only have been natural. She would have understood that. She could have met her then on equal terms, and they would either have been "good pals" or violent enemies. But that this daughter of a shameless mother and the worst man she had ever known should be so utterly good and clean,

so unsuspecting, yet at the same time no fool—as her real capacity for work and business proved—was altogether disconcerting. Mrs. Pleydell had come to this, that she was afraid of being found out by Maisie. She dreaded the day when doubt would cloud the honest eyes, and Maisie's girlish lips would tell her what she thought of "bad women." It was horribly awkward about the school money; but there was no way of preventing her from writing that would not rouse suspicion. So it must just be chanced. And Mrs. Pleydell lived on thorns, wondering what Maisie thought, whether she really were as guileless as she seemed, how soon she would find out, and what she would do when she did. She also had another dread ever present in her mind.

Lola, on the other hand, was utterly delighted with their "find," and made a great pet of Maisie, who felt, in return, something of the definite antipathy for Lola that she had always entertained for Marie-Reine, but in this case without knowing why.

"It isn't like you to be ratty, Rips! Leave well alone, and don't meet trouble till it comes. The girl is a little-bit-of-all-right, and you are lucky. How the dickens did you manage to produce such a pearl, you old reprobate?"

"Must have got it from her father," jested Rips, grimly, "I'm getting old, Lola. Couldn't think of anything worrying me like this does. I'd ever so much rather have had a daughter like myself, or like you, than this . . . spotless virgin creature. It is no end of a responsibility; and I can't help thinking of those men, and how mad they would be if I dragged her into the thick of it all. They would say it wasn't playing the game. She doesn't know enough . . . What cursed fate was it that burdened me of all women with a daughter!"

Three weeks of busy management and pleasant duties and happy freedom had blossomed Maisie into a young womanhood so radiant that she was beginning to attract

attention. Her romantic tale and her handsome mother (whom Lola's sound good sense had forced to abandon dyes and make-up), added to her appearance, made her a great object of interest; and on the strength of it, Mrs. Pleydell and Lola found it very easy to increase their acquaintance and bring callers to the *appartement* in the *Petite Place.*

Maisie could not have told you what she thought of her mother. The handsome, ill-mannered, noisy woman, who dovetailed in with the rattling, boastful mamma of the brief holiday season, sometimes attracted and sometimes repelled her well-bred daughter. At all times, the girl was conscious of falseness—a false look or expression, a false ring in the voice, a false note in conversation. Maisie would not let herself think of it. The freedom of her days, and the petting and laughing and irresponsibility, brought her a great rest, and a pleasure unlike any she had known; and it lulled her uneasy thoughts to quietude.

Hardly an evening passed without guests and play. Maisie used to get the tables ready and set out the glasses, the new cards—she could never make out why new cards were essential and thought it dreadful waste—the *crême de menthe* and the whisky and mineral water. She took no part in the play. Her task was, to have the fragrant coffee, of which she kept the secret, always ready. It was a simple trick—roasting it fresh and grinding it hot; and it gave a *cachet* to their evenings that delighted Mrs. Pleydell.

One day a telegram came, and Rips and Lola whispered over it frowningly. Maisie was not told its contents, but was conscious of an atmosphere of excitement, and of a rather unusual concern on the part of the two elder women to have everything nice. She actually found Lola rearranging the sideboard, and Mumsie

anxiously removing superfluous powder from her nose and neck.

The *Petite Place* looked fairy-like in the dusk. By day its tall lime trees and red-tiled promenades had a stately old-world air, and the *appartement*-houses ranged round it were dignified enough in style to have housed the most exclusive *noblesse*. By night, the lamps among the trees, the towering castellated roofs and quaint gables outlined against the sky, and the tiles gleaming as if wet, gave it an unreal loveliness. Maisie would sit in the deep seat framed by the tall narrow window recess, and gaze out in silence for long spells of time. Footsteps echoed and re-echoed from the cobbled streets hard by, and died away just as one thought the walkers must be coming in sight. Then, when they seemed to have gone into the distance, the person you no longer expected to see was passing under the very window. This trick of acoustics gave Maisie constant amusement and surprise.

The footsteps hurried and slackened, on this particular evening; and died away and rang out again. There was a good crowd, evidently, jostling each other in the Rue de la Ville, where late-at-night marketing could be done. This was someone coming to the *Place,* surely. No. Yes. No. Gone. What about these? No, they were the other side of the Rue de la Ville, faint and uninteresting. Here was someone—two marketing women; their steps had all but faded away when they suddenly came round the corner. Maisie watched them as they receded slowly; and with a start realized that two men had stopped at the door and were coming in.

Two men, whom Maisie observed with interest. They came into the sitting-room together. One was young, French, and a dandy, with hair arranged in a style she had never seen before and which made her want to laugh. He bowed with so much action and *empressement* that he looked as if worked by wires. The other was over

fifty, tall, lean, and English. His manners were easy and quiet, his voice low, his clothes unremarkable—the appearance of a man of the world with plenty of means. His name was Sefton, and it transpired casually that he had just left the Riviera. He greeted Mrs. Pleydell and Lola as one who was already known. Nothing boisterous or hearty; it was impossible to say how well or how slightly he was known. Maisie could not make out, either, whether he was a friend of the Frenchman with the fancy hair, or whether they had only arrived together by accident.

There were two or three other visitors present. Mr. Sefton had a knack of addressing the company generally while seeming only to talk to his hostess. He made everyone feel at ease, even the incomprehensibly excited Mrs. Pleydell.

"It is awfully good of you to let us come like this," he said to her, in his smooth voice. "You don't know how jolly it is not to be in a club or a hotel or a casino. You have an awfully nice little place here; women do know how to make things look homey; what a happy knack it is."

The others were all included in this expression of feeling, and joined in irresistibly, all self-consciousness dispelled by the pleasant friendliness of the new comer. Lola hastened to advertise Maisie, and to point out her home-making virtues, while the girl laughed lightheartedly and told some sprightly tales of the difficulties from which she had rescued Mumsie, and the weird arrangements prevailing before she took them in hand.

"I wouldn't let Mumsie loose in the market by herself!" she cried; "you don't know what she wouldn't be capable of bringing home—a conger eel and some wedding cake and a peach—for lunch. She would think that splendid; wouldn't you, Mumsie dear?"

The gay impudence made everyone laugh, and Mumsie

dear plaintively bemoaned the want of respect with which her age and experience were treated. The evening went off delightfully.

Mr. Sefton did not play until rather late in the evening, when another couple appeared. He sat near Mrs. Pleydell, talking to her in his low voice; most of the time the others could not hear what was being said, and Lola in particular was in a noisy mood. He sat with one arm flung over the back of his chair and the other hand thrust between his crossed knees. Maisie thought he looked the most easy-going, quiet, almost lazy person she had ever seen until all in a moment—she never knew how or why—he seemed to be watchful, waiting, alert. She felt strangely attracted to, or interested in, this tall grey man who was so attentive to her mother. Perhaps—the idea thrilled her with delighted excitement—he liked Mumsie very much and was going to marry her. How strange that would be. What she could not make up her mind about was, was Mrs. Pleydell glad to see him, or was she, could she be, a little afraid?

"You have got it all right," Mr. Sefton was saying at that very moment. "It looks the real thing, not too opulent, and not stinted. It's good so far. Lola must not be quite so noisy. Choke her off, can't you?"

"You had better do that yourself," retorted Mrs. Pleydell. "Tell me"—with a visible effort—"what you think of my daughter."

Sefton looked at her with eyes full of amusement.

"It is rather tall, isn't it?" he asked. "What is the object of it, and why wasn't I consulted?"

There was something threatening in the soft tones.

"What do you mean by 'tall'?" countered Mrs. Pleydell.

"It would take a lot to make any of the old lot, if they should turn up, believe that you could have that girl for a daughter."

Contempt was in the voice now.

"Then you are a fool, that's all," said Rips, rudely.

They looked hardly at each other. The man spoke first.

"It is not *his* girl, is it?"

"Haven't you heard her laugh . . . or looked at her hands . . . can't you see her hair . . . ? Why in hell should I, of all women, pretend to have a daughter? It is bad enough that I should have one . . . I'm not likely to go to look for it gratuitously."

Sefton leant back, amused and convinced.

"Tell me about it to-morrow," he said. "I'll be here at eleven. Do you want news of him?"

Mrs. Pleydell frowned. They leaned forward, apparently to get a better view of the prettily lighted room and the card tables. Their heads came closer together in that way, and the brief whispers were punctuated with jesting remarks aimed at Lola, the young Frenchman, and Maisie.

Mr. Sefton called next morning, and dropped in at night. He met them in their walks, and escorted them to the Casino. He took them out to tea, and gave a select dinner for them at the Hôtel de la Côte. Maisie refused point-blank to go to the latter entertainment, and, with good-natured laughter, was left at home. She prepared the sitting-room, as usual, for possible guests, thinking that, as the dinner was at a hotel, the party would come home early; and then went out for a moonlight stroll in the clear, clean frosty night. When she returned, she heard voices in the sitting-room; the dinner party had got back before her.

Smiling to herself, and preparing some impudent chaff about the inferiority of hired as compared with home entertainment, Maisie opened the sitting-room door and paused for a moment on the threshold. She stood, lightly balanced, graceful, in the handsome fur jacket which

had been Mrs. Stutchberry's parting gift, and a fur cap with violets under the rolled brim above her brightly tinted face—the embodiment of fresh girlhood and enjoyment. Then the smile faded.

She saw, confronting her, Lola, her mother, Mr. Sefton, and three other men. One of them was the Comte de Marinde.

When Maisie wrote her dutiful letter to Mrs. Stutchberry she also wrote to Mrs. Macleod; and that lady, overwhelmed with excitement, telegraphed to the sisters and arrived the same night. She found their excitement to be more subdued than her own.

"Were you not extraordinarily surprised?" she cried, when once she had ascertained that her news was no news to them.

"I don't know whether I was so much surprised," returned Mrs. Stutchberry, "as relieved. It seems that all's well that ends well, and it is better for Maisie to have a home and a mother than to be all on her own. What I principally care about now is that I may get what is owed me."

"Did she mention that?" exclaimed Mrs. Macleod. And then the letters were duly read and compared.

To Mrs. Macleod, Maisie had opened her heart, telling her of the horror of the hotel and the peacefulness of her present quarters. Her mother, a handsome, good-hearted, easy-going person, Maisie's position, free and trusted and responsible; it was all ideal. The Sisters Stutchberry stared.

"How could an abandoned, drunken, violent-tempered creature have become such a model?"

That was what Mrs. Macleod could not say. She could only shake her head in doubtful agreement.

"What is it she says about remittances?"

Miss Stutchberry read once more the phrase that Maisie had penned so trustingly.

"I wonder *what* remittances? Who from? Why remittances? It sounds as if she were paid to live out of England, like the ne'er-do-well sons who are sent to the colonies."

All Mrs. Macleod could think of was to write to Rosalie for information.

Now, Rosalie, like all her country-women, had an eye to the main chance. The present position was entirely to her liking. The money was good and punctually paid, Maisie was more a beloved friend than a mistress, the household was a pleasant one and easy-going; and Rosalie knew secrets that ensured her respectful and considerate treatment. When she came, as she sometimes did, to help Maisie at night with a supper-party or some extra-smart function, the gentlemen were liberal with their *pièces de cent sous;* and the *Petite Place* was most conveniently near to the little retreat with the *tonnelle* and the *jet d'eau.* Maisie took Rosalie's entire stock of new laid eggs, and the chickens killed for the pot; and the garden produce that otherwise it was more trouble to dispose of; and if between themselves she and her fat man were by no means enamoured of Madame Plédelle, formerly *Stöqué'ss,* nor of the company she kept and the establishment she plainly aimed at setting up, well! *Que voulez-vous? Il ne faut pa' êt'e trop difficile.*

So Rosalie wrote to *cette bonne dame* Macleod that *la petite Mees* was in good hands, and *adorée par Madame sa mère, qui était tout-à-fait remise* and *en bonne santé;* it was a *ménage tout ce qu'il y a de plus correcte,* and Rosalie herself worked there and had every opportunity of seeing how *comme-il-faut* it was. It was a great pleasure, at last, to see Mademoiselle Maisie so well placed. And Mrs. Macleod, full of wonder, and Mrs. and Miss Stutchberry, full of a more commercialized hope, agreed that no one was past praying for,

after that, and little Maisie had indeed been watched over by a special providence.

This was not exactly Maisie's own view. The intrusion of M. de Marinde had very grievously upset her, and Mumsie had a difficult time in trying to explain the position.

"I don't care whether he comes or stays away, dearie, but he is a friend of Mr. Sefton's, and Mr. Sefton would want to know why he should not bring him. You do not want to take him into your confidence, do you, about a thing like that?"

In saying "a thing like that," Mrs. Pleydell managed to make Maisie feel very uncomfortable.

"Men are so apt to lay all the blame for things of that sort on girls," continued Mrs. Pleydell. "They might say nasty things about you . . ."

"Then," broke in Maisie, "they can't be fit to know! As a matter of fact, M. de Marinde isn't."

"But, my dear, I don't want you to make an enemy of him. He might be very dangerous. And now that he finds you with good friends he is probably very much ashamed of himself, and would gladly have the matter forgotten. It might be much wiser just to let it drop."

"Mumsie! Do you really think it the proper thing to keep bad company for fear bad people should tell lies?"

"Maisie, dearie, I don't pretend to be clever or to be able to argue. I'm only your poor old Mumsie, anxious for her girl not to make life too difficult. I have nothing to leave you when I die, and you have found out for yourself how hard things are made for lonely girls. All I want is that you should not make enemies for yourself. Is that so strange, when I know what a bad time you have been through already for want of friends?"

Maisie felt helpless, hemmed in. Mumsie looked pathetically worried; and yet Maisie knew herself to be

right, her logic and her ethics the only true ones. But she could not insist.

"Mr. Sefton is a gentleman," went on Mumsie. "He will see that you are not annoyed."

It was horrible to have de Marinde dropping in whenever he liked, and becoming an *habitué* of the *Appartement Brindejonc;* but it was quite true that otherwise Maisie was not annoyed. It did not surprise her much, either, when the Comte Baba (or Dada) turned up likewise, bringing with him a foolish-looking Austrian officer who believed himself to be very knowing. The Frenchman with the odd coiffure had disappeared. Mumsie said he had played too high and had "gone under." Maisie shuddered a little whenever she passed the Casino building. How could people be so idiotic, and so wicked?

Maisie's joy in her home was much damped; and she was even dissatisfied with Rosalie, who instead of overflowing with her usual indignation against de Marinde, only said, *"Dame! Que voulez-vous? Il n'faut pa'y faire attention, Mame'zelle. C'est pas la peine d'êt'e trop difficile. I'en a de bons, i'en a de mauvais. C'est toujou' comme ça."*

The card playing now continued very late into the night; and once Maisie heard what sounded like a terrible row. No allusion was made to it next day, and for some reason Maisie did not speak of it either. She thought she saw her mother watching her furtively, but could not be sure. Something, she knew not what, made her feel uneasy. She went about with the same feeling of lurking danger that had so oppressed her when in uncertainty about the Hôtel des Alpes at Challenges.

Mont Roselle was now full of pleasure seekers, and at the height of its gay winter season. Maisie was not encouraged by her mother to join in any of the public amusements; and all invitations offered by the men who came to the evening receptions were declined. At times

Maisie felt like rebelling; but had not as yet done so. Crowds of people thronged the streets, the two hotels were crammed to bursting. Everyone who had a room or a corner to let had lodgers or boarders—even the Auberge Bonhomme did a roaring trade. The celebrated string band, the waterfall and its perpetual rainbow, the Tzigane concerts, and the really first-class little theatre—at which all the players were townspeople, like the Irish Players at the Abbey Theatre, and all the pieces specially written for them—drew the very *crême de la crême* to Mont Roselle. Maisie watched the gay parties with a little envy; but her nature was too true and sweet to dwell much on her own need for pleasure. She went once or twice to the theatre with Rosalie as chaperon, and could not sleep afterwards for excitement and rapture.

She had made up a queer kind of friendship with Mr. Sefton. Always he had a little word for her, a nod or a look of appreciation, a place for her beside him, a little bit of useful information, or some interesting comment about a book or a building or the day's news in the paper. The girl cherished deep in her heart the hope that one day he would be her father and that she would be able to go to him legitimately with her various doubts and troubles. On one occasion, when Lola was in one of her noisy moods, and de Marinde had been drinking, they attempted to force Maisie into taking a fourth hand at bridge. Sefton saw the trouble she was in, and intervened tactfully, for which she was extravagantly grateful. On her birthday he took her tobogganing and gave her a blissful collection of new sensations. That evening Sefton also gave Maisie a really charming present—a small flat oval locket of very yellow gold with her initials in pearls, and inside a four-leaved shamrock and a bit of white heather-blossom behind crystal doors. It was her first piece of jewellery, and when she shyly thanked

him, he bent his tall head and kissed her cheek in so fatherly a fashion, and yet with so much chivalrous respect, that her subjugation was complete. She wore the locket as a *porte-bonheur,* and said that Mr. Sefton was a dear, and the first man she had known whom she had really liked.

"Is it possible to be a bigger idiot?" asked Mrs. Pleydell of her confederate, hopelessly. "What have I done, to have a daughter like that?"

It gave Maisie nothing but satisfaction to find that as the days wore on, Mr. Sefton became more and more the confidential friend at the *Appartement Brindejonc.* He was consulted about everything and nothing was done without his approval. He slipped into the position of head of the house, and to all intents and purposes was the host at the evening gatherings. These gatherings became more thronged, and lasted later as time went on. Larger numbers of strangers came—all men—and stakes became higher and higher.

CHAPTER VIII

ENLIGHTENMENT

HANGING on to Sefton's arm with both hands, and almost dancing beside him in sheer lightheartedness, one day Maisie met Marie-Reine. A smile of pure malice spread over the Swiss girl's face, and she called after Maisie, making an appointment for the next Sunday afternoon, as she had something to say.

"Wonder what she wants?" chirped Maisie, in unabated high spirits.

"If she were a man, I should say, to borrow money," said Sefton, cynically.

"I can be cynical too!" laughed Maisie, "and you are wrong. It won't be to borrow money, but to say something she thinks will be unpleasant. But I don't care a bit what she says, now. I am out of it all, thank goodness."

She missed the look Sefton cast her.

That evening, for the first time, Maisie was going to the Casino. Mumsie had looked worried, and Lola had laughed her wild laugh; but Sefton had taken it for granted that his suggestion would be accepted. She went with him, on the tip-toe of pleasurable excitement. He had said, "The child ought to see more life; and she is getting to be grown up now, she must be taken about more. Come to the Casino with me this evening, little girl, will you? I'll take you if you would care to come."

Maisie was a little puzzled at the way Mumsie and Lola took it; but did not think long about that. The Casino was a wicked place with public gaming tables;

she would see, at first-hand, some of the thrilling scenes she had read about in the books devoured on the hearth-rug at Mrs. Stutchberry's. She remembered descriptions of the tense white faces, the hungry glitter in the eyes, the reckless laughter, the hollow-eyed despair, the fiendish glee, the unholy excitement, the gambler's lust; she was crazy to see for herself and to be able to talk about it.

One is bound to confess that she found the reality very tame. She saw no evidence of "lust" nor of despair; only an uncomfortable number of more or less well-bred people pushing as hard as their conception of manners would allow them to get close to the tables, which did not seem to interest them much when they got there. Even when Sefton made her risk a five-franc piece—which she lost, as well as another which he advised her not to risk—there did not seem to be much thrill. Nobody even noticed that she was a novice—usually, in Maisie's fiction reading, the novice brought *la veine* and was eagerly watched and followed; but nobody followed her luck, which was lucky for them!

It all seemed a little flat.

The music was too loud, and the ice Sefton gave her was not as good as those of the confectioner in the *Petite Place*. It was more amusing to stroll up and down, watch the people, and pick out the oddities. Sometimes a scrap of conversation, or a chance phrase, made them laugh. Sefton was capital company, and saw the amusing side of things. Mumsie was always surprised when you thought things funny; and Lola only cared for broad jokes.

Maisie's face wore its pretty scarlet stains, as one amusing sight after another caught her attention. Her eyes danced and shone, her white teeth showed, a dimple played distractingly in one cheek.

"It is too funny for words," she cried, turning her

face up to Sefton's in merriment; "I came thinking I should see tragedy and feel thrills; and I find the weirdest hats I have ever seen, and the most comic-looking people! You can't get thrills out of people who look as if they had been meant for gargoyles, and left over. Oh! *Do* look at that poor old dear!"

She wanted to get away from the vicinity of the tables again; but each time Sefton made a short turn and came back. This time, a square-shouldered man, whose face proved to be ridiculously boyish, left the table counting his winnings and consigning them to his pockets as he moved slowly past the crowd. Sefton could hardly have helped seeing him, but for all that, walked right into him.

Some of the money fell on the floor. Sefton did not commit the *bêtise* of helping to pick it up; he only kept other people from closing in. Then he apologized to the youngster for his awkwardness; adding sharply, "Better to go straight home now, hadn't you? You have a good deal of money on you, if I am not mistaken. Don't dawdle about with it."

The young man was staring at Maisie, who smiled back in his face. They all left the Casino together.

"Shall we escort you to your quarters?" asked Sefton, managing to infuse so much pitying protectiveness into his voice that the young man got nettled. The end of it was that he strolled as far as the *Petite Place,* and was invited up to the *Appartement Brindejonc,* Sefton, dubious and precautionary, advising him to go home before he was robbed of his money, but grudgingly acceding to his suggestion that he should be allowed to call and make Mrs. Pleydell's acquaintance. The suggestion had come from Maisie first.

Before young Torrance left that night, the greater part of his winnings were transferred to Lola and Sefton, who took bank in turn at baccarat.

Maisie met Marie-Reine as arranged on Sunday after-

noon. The Swiss girl was in one of her provoking moods, and broke into constant laughter, sang snatches of ribald songs, and looked at Maisie with a world of hidden meaning in her malicious eyes. To all inquiries of what it was she had wished to say, she replied by an enigmatical laugh, or a taunt such as Little Innocent, Saint Uncanonized, oh, what simpleecity, until Maisie threatened to go.

"Why did you leave the Hôtel?" she asked at last. And as Maisie looked wonderingly, continued:

"Why did you leave us—we are not saints and angels—but why leave us for Sefton and Lola Mount? We are not so wicked, us, when you think of them. The nice pair, the lovely ones . . ."

"I do not know what you mean," said Maisie, with much haughtiness.

"No? I weel explain. Those two, they have gambole everywhere, they know all tricks, now they are partners. No one have catch them yet, they are either each too clever. They come here to make gambole—where you are is a private gamboling house. Young de l'Andrière, he gone away ruined. The silly ole man de Marinde took there; he loose his wife's fortune. The Dada—or is it Baba?—he is so very angry, because he can't get no pigeons to pluck, the rooks at Madame Plédelle's too clever. And you and your face and your story so *romantîque,* all help them. They make it talk of everywhere, and men come there to see you and think it all so pretty, until they play—and loose. No one ever win, always loose, when Mr. Sefton, who say he come from the Riviera, is there."

Maisie turned a stony face to Marie-Reine.

"Thank you very much," she said, slowly and deliberately. "I am really most obliged to you, for all the interest you take in our household. I knew you had something really pleasant to say, when you showed such a

desire for my company. Shall we say good-bye now? *Good-bye,* not *au revoir.*"

She walked slowly to the glass and adjusted her hat, then swung out with her free stride and took her way down the first road that invited her. She did not want to go home.

It would not be true to say that Maisie either accepted or rejected the brutal statements cast at her by the ribald Marie-Reine. She could not tell, she did not even try to think whether they were facts. The thing that galled and smarted was, that in her heart she knew they might be true. She had no faith left, to give her complete trust in anyone. It hurt her far more too, to think of Sefton being what Lola called a crook, than to think the same of her mother. There had always been an element of distrust, in regard to her mother; with Sefton she had never had a misgiving. As she walked along, the mere thought of it brought smarting tears to her eyes, and she held her head down not to have them seen.

When she got home, and was laying the frugal supper, Sefton came in. He talked awhile in the front room to Rips and Lola; but after a little strolled through the folding door and offered to "help with the chores." Silently she let him take the knives out of her hand, and his strong warm fingers lingered against hers. . . . She could have burst into tears.

Presently he said:

"What secret did the sprightly Maid of the Inn impart to you this afternoon? Were you right or was I?"

"I was," answered Maisie, rather hoarsely.

He came round to her side of the table and put knives for the bread and cheese. Leaning towards her with one hand on the table he said, low and soft, "Did she say anything that really hurt you?"

Maisie raised her eyes to his. His face, so kind and full of concern, was very close to hers. His eyes made

the colour leap to her cheeks. She nodded an answer, and turned away.

Sheltered from view by one half of the folding-door, he took her in his arms, so gently, so kindly, she never dreamt of resisting.

"Can you tell me what it was?" he whispered low. "Can I help you? I can't bear you to be grieved . . ." His cheek lay against hers. For a moment he held her so; then as she withdrew her face and looked at him again, he caught her close and kissed her lips.

Slowly he released her, slowly she moved away and resumed her work, trembling, shaken with a feeling she did not understand. All supper-time, she was silent and shy, stealing a glance at him now and then, flaming scarlet when she found his eyes evermore seeking hers.

After supper she slipped away to her room, and wrestled with the trouble in her mind. Over and over she turned what Marie-Reine had said, and tried to adjust facts and work out theories; but always the subject evaded her, slipped past her, and left her thinking of a pair of hard, clean-shaven lips pressed on hers, the clasp of strong arms round her shoulders. The remembrance of Sefton's kiss sent little shudders through her. She longed to say good-night to him, but was too shy to venture back to the sitting-room. It was a great relief when her mother called her, and on going to see what was wanted, to find that Sefton had not yet gone away.

She sat at the window, lifting a corner of the venetian, and gazing out into the night. A soft moist wind was blowing; presently Sefton sat beside her.

"What can you see, out in the darkness?" he asked, rallyingly. "Can I see too?"

He took the slats of the blind from her hand and leant near her to look out.

"That man, I am certain, is a murderer. Look how he slinks along. Slinks, that is the right word. He has

left a corpse somewhere about and he has blood-stains on him. This girl has been to pawn her mother's wedding ring to save the family from dying of starvation. She goes at night because she has no clothes, she is freezing under that ragged frock. That respectable looking old gentleman embezzled the trust money and reduced the orphans to beggary, and makes them work in his mills for fourteen hours a day at seven shillings a week . . ."

"Oh be quiet, do, with your horrors, Seffy; what in the world possesses you!"

Maisie laughed. It was a relief to laugh. He laughed too, and sent back a suitable answer to Rips' irritable protest. Then,

"What was it she told you?" low and guarded.

"I can't tell you," hoarsely. "Something horrible; it can't be true."

"What about?"

Silence.

"Tell me . . . Maisie! Sweetheart, you can tell me."

"Not now."

There was a noisy intrusion of late visitors, and a cry for new cards.

Maisie went about with singing in her heart. He had called her sweetheart. Sweetheart! Was there a dearer word to be found? How it sounded, on his lips. All else seemed unreal.

When she went to bed he came through the dining-room and said good-night to her in the passage. She stood shyly uncertain, and he drew her into his arms again, holding her in a long silent clasp with his lips on hers. She stole an arm round his neck and pressed his head down to her face.

"Good-night," he said quietly, though with an effort. "I'll take you out to-morrow, if you are good."

"Good-night," said Maisie. Her voice had an indescribable tone in it.

Mrs. Pleydell looked sharply at Sefton as he came back into the room. He was unconcerned, whistled softly, looked over Lola's hand, lit a cigarette; nevertheless her suspicions were alight. Later in the night, Maisie was roused from a soft sleep by angry voices and the banging of a door. One of the voices was Sefton's.

She stole to the dining-room door and listened.

"I'm not going to have any of your hanky-panky with Maisie," came in Mrs. Pleydell's unrestrained tones. "She's my girl, when all's said and done; she's got no one but me to stick up for her."

Maisie could not catch Sefton's low answer.

"Oh, I know quite well what I am. I don't need you to remind me. We are well matched, you and I. But not Maisie. It's not fair, and you . . . ! You must be . . . I don't know what kind of a blackguard you must be; and I've known some specimens, too. You keep your hands off my girl. You are not fit to black her boots. Don't you dare start any of your kissing tricks, and your blather, and your soft-soap. It's no good, Lola, I won't have it. I won't have her dragged through all this muck . . ."

"Maisie has got to be made useful, come now, Rips."

"So she is useful; and she is a draw, too. It was for her that young Torrance came, and Des Camps, and de l'Andrière, and that poisonous old bagman; yes, and de Marinde, too. She's damned useful. Quite useful enough. She can go on being useful unconsciously, she needn't be dragged in any further."

"But who wants to drag her in?"

Sefton spoke in his usual unruffled voice.

"I won't have you spooning and going on like that with her. It's no use saying you haven't. I saw your face, and hers; I know. Keep your hands off her, that's all I say, or I'll make a clean breast of it and tell her."

"I don't think there is any use in keeping up this

discussion," said Sefton. Maisie had just time to get inside her door and close it.

It would be difficult to describe her state of mind. Conviction so complete as to be absolute knowledge, came over her in regard to the information ladled out by Marie-Reine. Sefton's kisses tingled on her lips, and she longed for the clasp of his arms; but she knew him for a rook and a crook and a sharper, and her mother for his accomplice, past all doubt. And she herself had been dragged in. She had been "useful"; Torrance, and Des Camps, and de l'Andrière who had "gone under," and the old man, and de Marinde—she supposed they had all been fleeced, and that their money was the money she, Maisie, spent with such pleasure to make the *Appartement Brindejonc* attractive and comfortable, to bring more men to be fleeced. All night she tossed and moaned, in such agony of shame and misery as she had never dreamt of.

CHAPTER IX

YOUNG TORRANCE

YOUNG Torrance was very rich. He was also rather stingy. He had a great idea that people were on the lookout to fleece him, and a great idea also, that he could take care of himself vastly well. He had been much affronted by Sefton's palpable hints that he did not know how to look after his money; and some further advice to be careful about women had also roused his boyish vanity. He was, however, very susceptible where women were concerned, as Sefton had informed himself. He had succumbed to Maisie's scarlet cheeks and pretty eyes without a struggle; and although he thought "those old ghouls" were thoroughly queer fish, he could not keep away from the *appartement* in the *Petite Place*.

The day after Maisie's enlightenment, he met her taking a walk. The poor child had left her duties and tramped miles, to escape the thoughts which followed her the more persistently.

Young Torrance took the opportunity to make himself agreeable, and they arrived at the flat together, jesting and chatty. Maisie had, however, moved by the dictates of conscience, reproved him for gambling and tried to get him to promise to give it up.

"Well, I will; after this week," he promised. "I said I'd play to-night, and I am bringing some fellows to your place to-morrow; but I will finish up on Saturday. Will that please you?"

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright!"

"Then that *will* please me tremendously."

"Don't you like people coming to your place . . . ?" He did not finish the sentence, feeling it was bad taste.

"I love people coming," cried Maisie, "but I hate them to come to play. It is dreadful. I can't tell you how I . . . how wretched it makes me."

Young Torrance looked very grave.

"Can't you get *them* to give it up?" he asked at last.

She shook her head. But by the time they reached the *Petite Place,* the serious mood had evaporated, and the prospect of hot *brioche* and Maisie's tea occupied young Torrance to the exclusion of all other ideas.

He would have liked to propose to Maisie, but she belonged to a queer set and he was afraid of being "had." He knew his love of gambling was his weak point; but he was more afraid of marriage. The girl was A1 to look at, to talk to, to go about with; should he, or should he not? He debated it in his mind through all their light chatter.

Maisie was terribly nervous at the idea of seeing Sefton again, and kept young Torrance as a buffer. The apparently pronounced flirtation she had embarked on with him made the family stare.

She could not prevent Sefton coming into the kitchen, where she was busying herself before supper. He found her there, defenceless.

"What is it, Maisie?"

Oh, his dear voice, his kind face. What use was it to pretend or to fight against him. She was in his arms, clinging to him, drawing his face again and yet again to hers so that he might kiss her and press his cheek against her hair and kiss her again. Why was he a scoundrel, and yet so dear?

"Did you hear, last night?" he murmured.

Maisie nodded, and a sound came in his throat, but whether of concern or annoyance she could not tell.

"I saw your door close," he said, presently.

"Is it true?" she asked, tremblingly, pressing her face against his coat.

"M-m," he assented, gravely. She gave a despairing gasp.

"It is true. It is all true," he went on, in low tones. "All true, except . . . except that . . . I was doing . . . this, for fun, or for . . . business."

He had put her a little way from him as he spoke; and then caught her back to his breast, kissing her in a gust of passion that took her by surprise. She struggled to escape, but he held her inexorably, and she yielded herself, clinging to him in silence, getting some forlorn comfort from contact with his strong limbs, his shaven face, his thick close hair. Presently he released her.

There were sounds in the other room, and Maisie cast a shy glance at his face. It was seared with passion and —was it vice? He looked old, drawn, shrunken. Maisie knew him in that moment for what he was, a bad and dangerous man; the mask was gone, the glamour faded. He was listening, alert, acute, with an expression of cold malice that scared her. Then he slipped out by the side door into the corridor.

Mrs. Pleydell stood in the kitchen doorway that opened from the dining-room.

"Where is Seffy?" she asked Maisie, busy now with a salad mixture. Mumsie's voice was strained.

"Seffy?" repeated Maisie, her face hidden as she stooped over the basin. "He must be in the bathroom. Oh, Mumsie dear, do give him a clean towel. There isn't one there."

"Is that young Torrance fool going to propose for Maisie? That is what I want to know."

Thus Lola.

"It looks like it. I really don't know. I should think

he is too cautious; but anyway if he does, we must leave him enough to provide for her on."

This was accepted as good sense and good policy.

"She had better make sure of him while he is in the mood . . ."

"Never mind young Torrance," broke in Sefton. "What about His Royal Highness?"

"Yes? What about him?"

"Those two men he has with him are millionaires several times over; they are both gamblers; and both *coureurs de filles*. I want Maisie taken where they will see her."

Mrs. Pleydell grew suddenly shrill.

"I won't have it, do you hear, Seffy? I *won't have* the girl used as that kind of a bait. Those creatures; that Hertzmann—what are you thinking of?"

"You make me tired, Rips. I think you are getting childish. What harm can Hertzmann, or Graumann, or the Prince himself, for that matter, do Maisie? The girl is in love with me."

The detached, indifferent expression gave the statement an insolence to which no words could do justice. He cut short Mrs. Pleydell's flow of invective.

"Yes. Me. Don't you think it is a good bit safer, than to have her taking a fancy to some of the apes who hang round here? It was the best thing that could happen. You can't pretend to think I am such a fool as to do her any harm. Pull yourself together, Rips, and be sensible. This red-cheeked daughter of yours has put you off your balance altogether."

"What a devil you are, Seffy. I wonder how you will die? Not in your bed, for certain; someone will murder you . . ."

"Tut! Wait till it happens. Meanwhile, take Maisie to the Casino every afternoon— You keep out of it,

Lola, see? You are out of harmony, in the domestic picture."

Maisie proved unexpectedly stubborn, however.

Go to the Casino she would not. Nor would she have any more men introduced to her. Her face had lost its bright colour, there was a little line in her forehead and her brows were drawn together in a pathetic frown. She looked her mother steadily in the face, and though her voice was husky, it was controlled.

"It is no use, Mumsie, I have made up my mind."

She sat, with a piece of sewing in her hands, in the deep seat at the window. Every now and then she would let the work fall, and gaze over the Place, an unconscious sigh rising to her lips. Mrs. Pleydell watched her, wondering how much she knew or guessed, how far Sefton had gone in his love-making, what she would do when, if ever, she knew all. Maisie was young, childish for her years, unversed in worldly wisdom; but she lacked neither courage nor determination. What would she think it her duty to do, the mother wondered. And Sefton; he was so cool and careful up to a certain point; but he was not to be trusted not to do something dangerous. Over and over again he had wrecked things by being too callous. It put people off. Suppose, if Maisie would not do what he wanted, he were to pour the obscene history of the past over her, to reduce her to submission! Mrs. Pleydell felt hot and tingling all over at the thought. The joint intrigue against her father, that had ended so disastrously for them all; the episode of Madame Binon and Baptiste de la Ferronnière . . . Mrs. Pleydell glanced fearfully at Maisie, whose troubled gaze was turned towards the Place, and whose mind wandered in a dreary maze from which there seemed no exit. Mother and daughter had a common bond at last, although they knew it not—Dread.

It was with real terror that Mrs. Pleydell heard Sefton

come in, that afternoon. She was lounging on the sofa in comfortable *déshabille,* while Lola sprawled in a big arm-chair with her feet over one arm of it. Maisie still sat in the window. The colour rose to the roots of her hair; but she did not turn her head. Neither of the others moved. They were too accustomed to Sefton's presence to "make a visitor" of him.

"Not out?" said Sefton, softly, lifting his eyebrows.

"No," replied Mrs. Pleydell, none of her fear showing in her voice. She never shirked battle with anyone but Maisie.

"Why?"

The tone had something so threatening that Maisie turned quickly, in surprise and resentment.

"Because I did not choose," something prompted her to say, coldly; and even as she said it, understanding came to her. It was by his orders, and for his purposes, that she was to have been taken to the Casino. And he could kiss her, and speak to her as he had done . . . ! She almost strangled, with wrath and helplessness, and something that was very like fear.

Mrs. Pleydell drew her breath at this casting down of the gauntlet. The girl understood, clearly; and was game enough to stand up to Seffy.

Sefton squeezed himself into the window seat beside Maisie, and stroked her hand and wrist gently. He could feel her trembling under his touch.

"I am sorry you should have been asked to do anything you don't like," he said, soothingly. "People are saying rather beastly things about your mother, you know"—Mrs. Pleydell started guiltily—"or rather, you don't know; how should you know? I advised her that she had better take you about with her more; it seems that her reputation has suffered through her going about and your staying at home." The voice was full of gentle raillery now. "They won't be long before they say that

she ill-treats you and keeps you as a kind of Cinderella, while she gads about with her men friends."

Mrs. Pleydell was smiling now. How damnably clever Seffy was! Maisie looked from one to the other in perplexity.

"Don't worry, childie," he smiled. "I ought not to have told you, ought I, Rips?" turning to the older woman. "Is anyone coming to-night, or are we going to have the place to ourselves, by any chance?"

He leant back and yawned, taking his hand away from Maisie's.

"The Torrance idiot is coming," volunteered Lola; "and some friends of his who asked to be brought here."

"I am getting tired of that young fool," yawned Sefton. "Is Maisie going to marry him?" He put his hand on hers again, pressing it warmly, closely, while he looked at her with mocking eyes. "He is a mighty fine match."

"Certainly not!" cried goaded Maisie, snatching her hand away. "Not if he were as rich as Crœsus."

"He is, very nearly," laughed Sefton, as Maisie swept out of the room in a whirl of anger. Her mind and feelings were in an utterly topsy-turvy condition; she did not know whether she loved Sefton or hated him, whether he was in earnest or scorn, whether she pitied him for his degradation or despised him, whether she forgave it or turned from it in disgust. Of her mother she would not let herself think at all.

She had escaped the toils of the Hôtel de la Côte only to fall into something much worse. After her letters of jubilation over the recovery of her mother, to Mrs. Macleod and Mrs. Stutchberry, that way out was barred to her. Pride would not admit of casting herself on their mercy and telling them who and what kind of a woman she had for a mother. She longed for some fashion of escape; but knew she would shrink from the idea of never seeing Sefton again. And she asked herself, not

daring to answer the question, would she stay with him, bear with him, *marry him*—if he asked her?

The money she was spending, with which she was entrusted, which had purchased her those pretty new clothes, those books in which she delighted, the little locket she prized so much—was all tainted. It did not do to think how it had been come by. She gave an involuntary cry of despair at the idea that she was dependent on it, and had been used, in some way she was not quite clear about, to get it.

She roused herself from her wretchedness to get the supper-table ready. Maisie had never heard the jape that "Life is one damned thing after another," but if she had, it would have expressed her feelings that evening. Young Torrance was coming with his friends; loud, feckless, vain young men like himself. He would try to touch her hand, and would hold it when he said How do you do and Good-bye; and Sefton would look on with his mocking eyes, and Lola would grin; how hateful it was.

Mrs. Pleydell was looking flushed and brooding, Sefton sat at the window, staring out as Maisie had done. Every now and again he turned and watched her deft, clever movements, and then looked out again on to the empty Place. There was a weight on everyone's mind, something in the atmosphere that was oppressive and threatening.

Soon after supper the rooms were filled with loud-mouthed, bragging youngsters, and some cooler-headed older men. Drinks went round, and play began. Maisie got away to her room as soon as she could; but before she reached its sheltering door, found herself waylaid by Sefton and held in his arms.

She struggled fiercely, and he held her, in absolute silence. When she ceased to pit her strength against his, he murmured, against her cheek, "Don't drive me away

from you, sweetheart; don't . . . not yet. The last good thing I shall ever know, or touch . . ."

She could not believe that his emotion was all assumed, and kissed him with all the passion she was capable of; but after she had shut herself in her room she remembered his face as she had seen it the other night, evil and watchful, and calculating; and was a prey to agonies of self-contempt.

She lay, between sleep and wakefulness, hearing some of the guests depart, one by one. When she had left the sitting-room, Lola was having a run of luck, but stakes were not high. Torrance had been playing at the Casino that afternoon, and boasted that he had "raked in a huge pile." The loud voices sounded faintly through the bedroom door; by and by, Maisie fell asleep.

She was awakened by someone entering her room, in the grey of the early morning. She sat up hastily, clearing some straggling hair from her forehead, and saw that it was Sefton. Staring at him with a presentiment of disaster, she watched him squeeze round the chair which almost blocked the way to her bed; and sit on the edge of the bed beside her.

The sense of the situation so bewildered her that at first she did not catch what it was that he said. When he laid a hand on her bare arm, clasping it firmly, and asked, "Are you properly awake? Can you understand?" her face flamed, and she could not reply.

"Maisie, my little girl, listen to me. You can help me very much if you will; but if you will not, then I am ruined, finished. Will you let me tell you, or is it no use?"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to do something wrong. It is no use pretending it is not wrong; but it will keep your mother's name out of a serious scandal, and it will save me from a most dangerous position."

He moved his hand further up her arm, stroking its softness, leaning towards her. His nearness and his caress had its usual effect. She did not know, with his kisses on her lips and in her heart, how to resist him.

"I will do it if I can," she faltered.

His face was in shadow, but she glimpsed it, grey and haggard. From the way a ray of light fell, faint and wan, outside her open door, she divined that the light was turned on in the sitting-room. She could hear whispering voices. There was a nightmare quality about the scene—the grey chill dawn, the grey glooming man, the hiss of the chittering whispers outside, the equivocal situation, the thing Sefton was going to ask of her—a thing made possible by that unnatural, fevered love-making which now with his hand on her arm, seemed monstrous, indecent, yet irrevocable. A spasm of anger seized her that her mother had let him come to her room like this, alone.

Sefton hesitated still. Maisie moved her arm, restive under his touch.

"A dreadful thing has happened," he said, at last, in a voice that was slightly hoarse. "Try and bear a great shock. Torrance has committed suicide."

"Mr. Torrance . . . has . . ." Maisie's gasp of dismay was almost a cry.

"He was found out doing an unpardonable thing. He was cheating, at euchre. I went home with him and made him give me enough money to cover what he had won from the people he played with here. As soon as my back was turned he shot himself."

"Mr. Torrance, *cheating?*"

Sefton nodded.

"Cheating!"

He watched her, under frowning brows, as she struggled to an easier position, and pushed her hair back impatiently.

"I don't believe it," she cried. "You are making some absurd mistake."

"There was myself, and de Marinde"—Maisie's face showed her scorn—"and Trevor and Maine, and Graumann. We could not all make the same absurd mistake."

"Oh!" cried Maisie, helplessly, her face in her hands. She did not believe this outrageous thing; she wondered what there was behind it, that would throw light on it did she but know.

Sefton stroked her hair, and then drew her against his shoulder, holding her with extraordinary tenderness. Looking up at him sharply, she remembered his request.

"What is it you want me to do?"

He spoke, as he always did, directly to the point.

"I know what you are thinking, and I do not blame you. You will probably think worse yet; it is unavoidable. I want you to come to the police, and say that Torrance had been paying you attention; that you would not marry him, and that he took it badly."

For some time Maisie sat rigid, in absolute silence. It could not be that Sefton had murdered Torrance; she rejected that idea. But they had robbed him. They had manœuvred a horrible accusation, and had used it to rob him. She saw it quite clearly; never doubted it. What she could not understand was, where was the danger for Sefton.

She would not ask. Drawing herself a little from his encircling arm, she said:

"Will you go, now, and let me get up and dress?"

She knew he would kiss her; hated the thought of it; but knew also that she could not bear that he should not kiss her. She wondered drearily how much vileness it would take to make his presence unwelcome.

Sefton's kisses, however, were light, and he made no attempt to obtain a return. He left her with a feeling of blank loss, her heart swelling dully, her eyes aching for

tears. Dressing hastily, she lost the thread of ideas, and found herself in a confused state of mind, unable to think or see clearly.

In the sitting-room, Mrs. Pleydell and Lola sat and sprawled. Sefton had lit his pipe, they had cigarettes; all were sipping absinthe. Maisie shuddered; and quite suddenly and swiftly, saw clear and came to a decision.

Coming into the room and closing the door behind her, she stood, erect and slim, waiting for a lead. After a minute's silence, Mrs. Pleydell fired off a sharp:

"Well?"

"Yes?" answered Maisie.

"Yes!" mimicked her mother, in a fancied imitation of Maisie's voice. "What does that mean? What are you going to do?"

"Before I tell you that, I want to be told why I am to do or say what Mr. Sefton wishes."

"So as to supply a reasonable cause for suicide, which will appeal to these officials. They will be very glad not to have a scandal in connection with gambling at Mont Roselle; but if it came to be declared, openly, a matter connected with cards and money, then there would be a prolonged inquiry and your mother's and my records are not clean enough to stand it."

"That is to say," Maisie laid it down in a hard voice, "that you are disreputable people and that this establishment is a questionable one. Yet you let me come here—let me come and be mixed up with your wicked schemes; and counted on me as an added attraction! Why should I lie to save either of you? Why should I?"

"Am I not your mother, Maisie?" began Mrs. Pleydell, in a lachrymose tone that made Maisie impatient; but Sefton broke in.

"There is no 'why' at all, Maisie; no reason of any sort why you should not let us go to the gutter. I did

not ask you to do this because there was any reason why you should; I asked you, that is all."

Maisie felt the force of that appeal.

"I do not feel that I ought to do it," she hesitated; and Sefton caught her up.

"Of course you 'ought' not. I told you that what I wanted you to do was wrong. But it would be wrong, too, for you to do the other thing. It would be a hideous thing if you were to take a hand in condemning your mother. It is always a vile position, and people do not forget it."

"There does not seem anything that I *can* do, decently," said Maisie, with heat. "That is your fault, not mine, and what I do not choose to associate myself with, is the supposition that Mr. Torrance cheated. I am sure he did not."

"You cannot make people abandon the evidence of their eyes," said Sefton, quietly; "but nothing is going to be said about that. De Marinde and Graumann do not talk; and Trevor and Maine have engaged to say nothing."

"And in any case, Maisie," put in Lola, hitherto silent, "it is not as if you could do the poor fellow any good. He is past your help now." She spoke reverently, and Maisie was touched.

"And it is for the benefit of his memory, as well as for ourselves, that he should be supposed to have done this dreadful thing for love, and not for shame," added Sefton, putting down his pipe and going up to Maisie. He held her arms above the elbow and drew her to him. "You will do this, for him as well as for us all, eh, Maisie, sweetheart?"

He bent his face to her hair, and she suffered a torment of shyness at so public an advertisement of their relations. What were those two women thinking—laughing, perhaps! But she did not release herself; and he

turned her face up with his hand and kissed her long and lingeringly. After a struggle to keep her composure, she broke into bitter tears.

Long he held her, hushing and soothing, while she sobbed. Long after the other two had gone to bed, they sat in silence, holding each other. After Maisie dozed off, with little recurrent sobs like a tired child, he carried her into her room and laid her on the bed, covering her feet with the down quilt. Looking at her as she lay there, a queer little smile twisted his face. Something of scorn, something of regret, and tenderness, made up the smile.

The police called at an early hour, and Maisie's swollen face and crimson eyes gave better testimony than anything she could have said. A love affair; a very natural despair; Mademoiselle was, of course, desolated. But what would you? Ladies could not always say Yes to even the most devoted suitors. Some must go without.

The various formalities were got through, and the funeral ceremony carried out. Poor young Torrance had no near relations, and no inconvenient inquirers turned up. Trevor and Maine, Mrs. Pleydell and Sefton, were the friends who accompanied the body to its last resting place; and the police, anxious to avert scandal from the fair fame of Mont Roselle, did all that was possible to arrange matters discreetly, and to spare the pretty Mees distress.

Maisie was in black that day. On her mother's return from the funeral she noted it and frowned. She hated gloom and what she called mopes.

For the next few days Maisie thought hard, seeing little of Sefton and speaking little to anyone. Mrs. Pleydell watched her with growing anxiety, believing that her daughter was preparing an ultimatum and wondering what form it would take. Maisie sat stitch-stitching, not speaking, gazing out of the window; answering coolly

and shortly if spoken to; sometimes Mrs. Pleydell would find the girl's eyes fixed on herself, with a penetrating stare that made her shrink.

"How long are you going to stay here?" Maisie asked, one evening.

"Three weeks more," answered Lola.

"And then?"

"We are going to Paris."

Maisie said no more. Once in Paris, she resolved, she would advertise for work. Mrs. Pleydell would have liked to ask her questions, but did not dare. Maisie's face and voice, in her own words, gave her the creeps.

CHAPTER X

AN IDEA

THE days passed by, and Maisie occupied herself with the packing. Mending, tidying, sorting, folding, she spent her time methodically and had all things ready and in order when the time came. Sefton left a few days before to find suitable quarters for the party. There was some unexplained friction between him and Lola; and the latter was "ratty," to use Mrs. Pleydell's expression, by reason of it. Lola was a very attractive woman in her way, buxom, grey-eyed, warm-skinned, with a dimple in her chin and very beautiful arms. She sang, in a sweet soft contralto, and had a great repertory of songs and breakdowns. The men whom she had attracted were frankly grieved at her departure, and made appointments with her for when they should come to Paris. At the station there was a great send-off, with bouquets and boxes of sweets, and good wishes, and kindly chaff directed at *la petite mees*. Rosalie was inconsolable, and she and the fat François formed part of the farewell group, waving hands and handkerchiefs and calling *bon voyage* as the train moved out of the station.

Maisie sat with her face turned from her mother, looking out of the opposite window. From time to time Mrs. Pleydell glanced at her, but the girl made no sign. When all traces of the neighbourhood of Mont Roselle had faded from sight, the older woman caught Lola's rather malicious eye and gave her a frown in return for the grin bestowed on her. Maisie, unconscious of any by-play, was trying to think out whether she would be glad

to see Sefton again, or sorry to come under his influence. In his absence the thing seemed unnatural and impossible. He was over fifty; he was a friend of her mother's, he was a gambler—a *dishonest* gambler; he was probably a thief; for had he not alluded to some past record that the police knew of? And he was in some way personally responsible for young Torrance's death. It was impossible to think of him as a husband; yet Maisie feared, dismally, that she would marry him if he asked her—marry him, and regret it, and loathe him and herself, ever after.

Lola flung herself back on the cushioned compartment and yawned loudly and luxuriously.

"That's the end of *that,*" she exclaimed, indistinctly because of her yawns. It is to be presumed she meant Mont Roselle. "Not such bad fun; and not such bad business either. Struck it rich, this time, didn't we? How much?" lowering her voice, "how much do you think it will work out at?"

They whispered mysteriously and laughed with chuckling glee; and exchanged some confidences of which Maisie was the object. Mrs. Pleydell's uneasiness about her daughter was treated with ridicule, without, however, much impression being made on it. For Lola was in entire ignorance of the root cause of it.

"Don't cocker her up in her whims and fancies. When she has got her work to do, she will be kept too busy to think things. It doesn't do to give in to a girl the way you do."

"I wonder whether she will do it?" mused Maisie's harassed parent. "She is very stubborn at bottom, she might just take it into her head that she won't—and even Seffy might fail . . ."

"You'll all have to understand one thing quite clearly, that I am not going to have any more of this sort of rot with Jim. That's got to come to an end."

Lola spoke very decidedly and with rising voice.

"Sh . . . sh . . ." warningly. "You know very well what *I* thought of it! It is no doing of mine."

"All right, but don't make any mistake about it. There's an end of it, once for all."

"I don't know what she will say . . ."

"Oh, there will be ructions, all right; Jim quite expects that. It won't trouble him much, that's one thing. The chances are she is one of the proud kind and will hold her tongue; but anyhow girls soon get over things of that sort. They have got to make one or two false starts, you know, before seeing how things are. We all had to. Don't you let it worry you, Rips old dear."

But "Rips old dear" could not help worrying. The quiet figure sitting at the other side of the compartment with averted head was to her like a figure of doom. She could not make up her mind how much Maisie really knew; how much she understood or how far some of her vehement words had been winged solely by impulse. She did not know what steps the girl was contemplating now. That she would settle down meekly, and help with the new venture in which the money won at Mont Roselle was to be sunk, she did not believe. Neither could she be sure that the secret she herself shared with Sefton, and which, so far as she knew, had not even been imparted to Lola, would not be told to her daughter by the man who, she knew all too well, was trying by hook and by crook to get Maisie in his power. Suppose, in one of those incomprehensible moods of his, he were to tell the girl? And suppose she were to tell . . . ? Rips old dear shivered with an old and real terror at the thought. If Maisie stayed with them, or left them, she equally represented a menace; she suggested in her potentiality the one thing of which Mrs. Pleydell stood in dread.

Mrs. Pleydell knew very well that, so far, Maisie's want of knowledge of the world shut her out, as all inno-

cent girls are shut out, from any possibility of gauging the depths of certain infamies, or seeing them in their recognized proportions. It was, for instance, more than likely that she would consider what her mother described as "straightforward pocket-picking" to be a more dreadful crime than blackmail, for sheer want of information concerning the ramifications and refinements of the viler offence. It was quite on the cards, therefore, that the Torrance affair had not yet dawned fully on her understanding; and no one could say for certain what line she would take when and if it did. And Mrs. Pleydell was further concerned at the tone Lola was taking about Maisie; it threatened to become awkward. It was all Seffy's fault, of course; but what a nuisance the girl was, to be sure. Yet now she knew too much to be shunted easily, thought Mrs. Pleydell; for, like all intriguers, she and Lola imagined other people to be overwhelmingly concerned in finding out and baffling their schemes.

No such notion, it is hardly necessary to say, had ever entered poor Maisie's head; had she been told that she was looked on as a possible danger, she would have been overcome with surprise.

All gamblers are superstitious; and Mrs. Pleydell, in spite of the uninterrupted success of the season at Mont Roselle, considered that the appearance of her unwanted daughter on the scene was the herald of bad luck. Nothing moved her from her fixed anticipation of disaster; and the Torrance tragedy—of a kind they had never before encountered—seemed to be the preliminary confirmation of her fears. Lola, on the other hand, considered Maisie a kind of mascotte; and declared that the success of the season (which was partly due to Maisie's charming presence), and the easy way in which the Torrance business had been disposed of was so much confirmation of *her* view.

Nevertheless, Lola had had nearly enough of Miss Maisie. She felt she could not stand much more . . .

She leant back, drumming her plump bejewelled fingers on the suit-case beside her, and letting her insolent eyes wander over the silent absorbed figure of the girl at the other end of the compartment. What an ass she was to cultivate that puckered frown. One of these days she would be sorry, when her forehead was criss-crossed with lines! Lola's thoughts wandered to the various compliments paid to her own smooth brow, which one fatuous admirer had gone the length of describing as "candid." Lola grinned out of the window as the recollection came to her.

Rips old dear did not grin. Her recollections were by no means entertaining. They were of a man—the one man—of whom she had been afraid, hideously and helplessly afraid. The girl over there was so horribly like him. That laugh of hers; and her fingers . . . Rips could hardly bear it, at times.

It had been a great job, putting her off when she asked about her father. "How had he died?" "When did he die?" Suppose Seffy ever told her? Suppose she went to see for herself? Suppose she told him? Mrs. Pleydell's lips felt dry and her throat clicked at the thought.

She had done two utterly unpardonable things, even according to her own code, although she did not repent of them. But she had done a worse thing yet; she had put herself in Jim Sefton's power. The doing of them had required his help; and she never knew when he would turn on her.

She did not know which she was afraid of most, her accomplice or her innocent daughter. Any day someone might turn up, or something unforeseen, or Seffy might yarn . . . Lord! What a world it was! Why was she tied up like this? And it all began over again, round and round in a tedious circle—the situation, its possibilities;

Maisie, Sefton, Lola, the old dread, the horrid secret—until her soul, or whatever substitute she owned for a soul, revolted and she took refuge from herself and her thoughts in ribaldry.

Maisie settled herself back in her corner and stared unblinkingly at the landscape, all unconscious of occupying the minds of her two companions to such an extent. She took no heed of the whispered chuckling conversation that began, and ended, and later began again. She took no heed of her mother either. All feeling connected with her was dead, save an occasional spasm of resentment. She remembered, dully, how she had heard her mother telling Sefton to "keep your hands off my girl,"—"she has no one but me to look after her"; but this had not touched her. She believed, in the harsh judgment of youth, that it had been a pose. She knew nothing of the curious strata of good and evil that make up human temperament. She only knew that she could far more easily forgive Sefton for his villainies—Sefton who was no kin to her but whom she loved and had kissed forgivingly—than the mother whose blood was in her veins. Sefton had disgraced himself; her mother had disgraced her, Maisie. She felt she could not stay with these people; yet could not endure the idea of cutting herself off from Sefton.

Lola lolled back sprawlingly and yawned again, loudly and unreservedly. She was in the middle of some spicy recital which she was telling with sleepy enjoyment. Her voice carried for a moment or two, over the rattle of the train.

"He said he didn't know what on earth to do. Never felt so embarrassed in his life. Can't you fancy old Tommy! So he said, 'My dear, there is only one thing you can do, and that is, tell your father!' And who do you think her father was?"

"Who?"

"The man Tommy had introduced Tiddly Bits to!"

Both women rocked with laughter. The joke seemed of superlative flavour.

"Tommy says he can't think what made him say it, except that he remembered quite suddenly an old song, 'I'm going to tell your father—won't he be angry, rather!' It came into his head, and he just said it without thinking; and she *told* him!"

Again they shook with laughter. There was something obscene in their emotion.

"Tell your *father*," repeated Lola, in an ectasy of enjoyment. "And she *told* him!"

Maisie listened in distaste, not understanding in the least, but revolted. "Tell your father." The words rang in her ears tiresomely, unmeaningly; and then a meaning shaped itself with sudden definiteness.

Maisie had never been able to glean anything satisfactory about her father. Since being told that she had his laugh and his hands, she had often wondered about him. It had never occurred to her that he was not dead; and she had allowed herself to be put off, when she asked questions about him, by an evasive story that it "upset" Mumsie, and recalled such painful memories that the subject could not be pursued. Lola had vaguely hinted that his record was not a happy one, and that his behaviour had "a lot to do with making your mother what she is"; and the only thing plainly stated was that he was Pleydell of Pleydell's Covert, one of the oldest families in Buckinghamshire, and a person from whom good looks were heritable.

Now, thought Maisie, I wonder whether there are not relations of mine, Pleydells, who, perhaps, did not like my mother, but would give me some sort of a decent start in life? I would not ask them for shelter, or for any help other than to be respectably independent. Her father's people! An old family. How nice, and safe,

and settled, it sounded! They could surely help her to get free from these dreadful associations and earn a living unconnected with gamblers and free from Counts and discreditable parents. She dwelt on the idea with a warming glow of comfort, and turned over and over in her mind means of communicating with unknown Pleydells. She surrounded it all, as usual, with a glamour of romantic possibilities which brought balm to her lacerated feelings and restored some of the shattered self-respect and helpfulness that recent events and present company had combined to destroy.

CHAPTER XI

THE TOFF'S PROGRESS

In the course of Fenton's respectable career, he had become possessed of many curious and picturesque possessions, which were stacked, stored, and stuffed away in the basement premises of No. 29. Among these accumulations Master Dickie—or Mr. Dick, as he had now become—got permission to rummage; and the result was a very spirited arrangement of the back room on the ground floor. A queer collection of sticks, flanked by assegais and some implements of murder from the South Seas, dressed one wall; and a couple of handsome pewters, despised by the unlearned couple below stairs, decorated the Welsh dresser, which Dickie substituted for the brass-handled mahogany sideboard from Maple's. Willow-pattern china, some Morland prints, and an assortment of books—school prizes, classics, old yellow-backs and new sevenpenny editions—filled the shelves of a cupboard with glass doors intended by Mrs. Fenton for crockery and edibles, these being ruthlessly condemned to the basement premises. A keyless Tantalus and a very handsome bridge set, two big brass jars, and a curious brass bracket which replaced the unlovely grate, gave the room almost a look of opulence. A brass curb fender, and some twisted iron fire implements, a big yellow-ware tobacco jar and Fenton's own presentation silver cigarette-box adorned the fireplace and mantelpiece. Toilet arrangements there were none. Mr. Dick kept his new things in their travelling receptacle, and repaired to the bath-room for all toilet purposes—occupy-

ing that apartment at such length that Anthony Rookwood's impersonal objection to the new lodger was strengthened by a strong individual grievance.

Dick the Toff could hardly believe his luck. When he had bluffed the money out of so seasoned a warrior as the Boss, he had hardly dared to hope it would bring him the fortune he pretended to anticipate so airily. But Luck, Luck, had been with him all through. The Luck that had thrown Fenton's address at his head, the Luck that had kept a warm place in that scoundrel's heart for the fair-haired boy all through the years; the Luck that had made old Boss tumble in, the Luck that had fashioned Lord Johnny and put him at Fenton's, the Luck that had fixed him into this gentleman-like room, with every appurtenance of decency—Mr. Dick's tongue clicked at the back of his throat in some nameless emotion as he thought of it. One thing after another, it had all followed on and fitted in. Would he be able to play the game adroitly and stay? A chill ran through his body at the thought of failure or detection, and the results.

Long confabulations with Fenton took place; and it was evident—or would have been evident if either Lord Johnny, or Mr. Rookwood, or the restless explorer, had spent their days at No. 29 to see for themselves—that the new lodger was much trusted and liked by the landlord. For, he accompanied this suave and busy person into the other lodgers' rooms and sat at their desks while Fenton polished their brasses and brushed their clothes. One or two discreet meetings with the Boss were engineered; it having been arranged that every Friday evening either or any of the partners might be found in the grill-room of the Scullery—a well-known hostelry where the pick-pocket can meet with perfect serenity the gentleman whose watch he snatched the same day in Regent Street; and where dukes, inspectors of police, financiers,

and ticket-of-leave men are all on an equal—and friendly—footing.

Occasionally a conference took place in a private room. The weakness of meeting at the Vaults, or at No. 29, was never committed.

"There is money in it every way," said Dick the Toff, on one of these occasions, as his flexible fingers drummed musically on the edge of a glass. "This chap, now, he is fearfully keen for a good place in the Honours List, and so he has compounded their misconduct. If the thing is carried through, the Party would pay through the nose to keep it out of the Press."

"No, not the Party. That's silly. The Party would chance publicity and beyond doubt would get at these documents and have them changed or destroyed. I would not risk that. Get at the old man himself. There are his own letters. He'll buy them, at any price—within his means."

"The Boss is right, Mr. Dick," said Fenton, soberly. "If he sees photos of his letters to the lady's lover, a gentleman in the Cabinet, and that one of hers asking for the Honour for her husband so as to save her reputation—you see? That's good enough, what?"

"Who gave them away?" asked the Boss.

"Dismissed private secretary took the letters to the Opposition. Then they were handed to Lord Johnny. Lord Johnny does not know what the deuce to do with them now he has got them. After all his talk about revelations, he is so scared when a revelation really comes his way that he goes to bed for a week!"

"You show the photos, and let him know you have the originals. We'll make quite enough that way. It doesn't do to push anything too far. Desperate men are dangerous."

The Boss was an adept at photography, and the transaction netted £3,000. The immediate result was a Turkey

carpet for the back ground-floor room, and the fitting up of a sort of cupboard as a dressing-room. The later results were odd, because so complicated. The Opposition Whip asked Lord Johnny what he was going to do in the matter of Mr. Blank's wife and the Honours List; and Lord Johnny, to refresh his memory, looked up the letters, finding them, under scrutiny, to be merely photographic copies on a very exact imitation of the original note-paper. Lord Johnny told the Assistant Junior Whip he had been made a fool of, and that no one could take action on photographic copies of originals no one had seen. The Assistant Junior Whip was of opinion, although he saw he had been made a fool of, that the copies were good enough, because no copy could exist without an original. This point was thrashed between them with ever-increasing fervour and feeling; and was put before several clever fellows at the Club, K.C.'s and fellows like that, who understand about things of this sort; and it was thrashed still further, by a widening circle, who all began to form conclusions about how it began and what was behind it, and to put names to it and throw out feelers about it. And before Lord Johnny guessed what was happening, the story, in a more or less true guise, was well on its way round the ocean of Society. The Assistant Junior Whip early abandoned the attempt at explanation, and in his resentment at Lord Johnny's futility, added that part of the story to the already enjoyable scandal. Lord Johnny's detractors gained as much in strength as the blackmailers did in pocket.

Another successful venture was the case of the inventor, whose system of utilizing the waste products at a certain government factory was being badly played with and delayed. In about six weeks from the time Dick the Toff went to work, a privately owned factory with which he had put himself in communication, was turning out thousands of pounds' worth of valuable material, the

inventor was on the verge of suicide, and a banking account, in the name of Richard Peyton, showed a balance of several thousand pounds. Lord Johnny brought the matter of the waste product before Parliament, and the War Office asked for more time to go into the matter. Before this time had expired, the results of the private firm's enterprise were in everyone's mouth. The hapless inventor to the end of his days blamed Lord Johnny for some indiscretion in his communications with Parliament and the War Office, which had given away the essential part of his process; and Lord Johnny, knowing himself entirely blameless, suffered under a blighting sense of injury which made him rail gloomily at the ingratitude which pursued public-spirited people.

The biggest haul of all was the new explosive. The Government had bought the thing; but were so appallingly slack in the handling of it that anybody, everybody, could get at the secret. The foreigners all over the country, stray tourists, the visitors who came sight-seeing, the Royalties and their suites who came inspecting—it was everybody's secret and a great scandal. And while Lord Johnny was blowing out his nostrils like a race-horse, and thumping his desk with his fist, and telling another outraged Briton with a grievance of the danger the country was in with such scandalous incompetence in high places, the German Government was in the very act of purchasing the secret from a gentleman-like person who spoke with an assumed foreign accent and a still more unreal lisp. Twenty-five thousand pounds was the price —with very trifling expenses involving a brief trip to the Continent.

Neither of the three rogues threw their money about. Fenton invested his with great discretion, settling some on his wife and child, buying a long lease of his house, and doing it up in sober, handsome fashion from garret to basement. The Boss bought speculative stock—making a good profit on his ventures—and a cottage in the

country with a garden and a paddock. Dick the Toff laid in some good wine and spirits and some super-excellent cigars; some superlatively good clothing, and some handsome silver and furnishings; and turned over in his mind the question of an annuity.

One evening, in a French paper—he made a point of taking the continental papers—he saw an account of Mrs. Pleydell's death in Paris.

A grim look came over his face as he read of the presence of deceased's daughter, and the evidence she gave.

"So she had a daughter," he said to himself. "I wish I had known."

The profitable nature of his exploits, however, engrossed all his attentions; and he dismissed the subject of Rips's death and Rips's daughter as too insignificant to engage him at the present time. The trim, smart figure was well-known, now, in Percy Street; cabmen, chauffeurs, police officers, and tradesmen all knew him by sight. He had the pleasantest possible smile and greeting for everyone, and understood how to be generous yet discriminating with tips. Fenton's admiration of him increased daily, and the pride in his voice when he spoke of him was marked enough for the other lodgers to notice.

The three lodgers had spoken to one another on sundry occasions, and exchanged greetings on the stairs and in the hall. Once Rookwood had been invited into the back room, and had gone reluctantly because he could not find a ready excuse. He had been impressed with the substantial and almost opulent comfort of the little den. The Toff could converse well, and had seen many things that made for interesting conversation; but he could not dispel the instinctive aversion that Rookwood entertained for him. An invitation to dinner was civilly declined and Dickie felt that Rookwood was not the kind of person on whom to waste cajolery. Lord Johnny was a far more promising subject; and in due course that genial noble-

man was enveloped in a web of flattery and fable such as his head had never been constituted to resist or to disentangle.

The conspirators were enjoying a well-earned rest, and had agreed that it was good policy to go easy for a while. So that Dick the Toff was somewhat surprised to see the Boss, evidently waiting for him, one evening at the Scullery, when the Toff had escorted some unsuspecting strangers to that agreeable place of revelry. Ridding himself of said strangers at the earliest possible moment, he joined the Boss in a whisky and soda.

"Anything up?" he asked, anxiously. A life on the edge of detection is apt to try the nerves.

"Yes," answered the Boss, slowly. He was looking at his partner with searching, critical eyes. "Yes. There is something up. I wonder in hell whether I had better tell you or not."

His eyes blazed into the Toff's. There was a brutal alertness about him that seemed to belong to wider, more primitive ranges than are to be found in London.

"Please yourself," said the other, curtly, "I'm not inquisitive."

"It's a pity you are such a damn rotter," said the Boss, speculatively, as if he had lighted on an estimate of this person for the first time, after long seeking.

"And it's a pity you haven't got better manners," yawned Dick. "We can neither of us help it, so why worry!"

The Boss coughed, and aimed at a handy spittoon.

"Have you got anything to say, or haven't you?" asked the Toff, fixing him with his cold pale eyes.

The Boss stared back unwinkingly. After a long pause he said,

"A girl came for you this afternoon."

"A girl?"

The Boss nodded.

"What girl?"

Again the Boss paused.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" sneered the Toff. "What did she want? What is she after?"

"You."

"Me? Well, what about me?"

"She says she is your daughter."

The Toff did some staring this time. Then a smile lit his face.

"So that's her game, is it? She's her mother's own daughter! Well, I'm . . ."

He broke into his low sweet laugh that was so infectious, and appeared genuinely amused.

"What is she like, Boss? Describe her unto me."

"She's pretty, and she's good—a damned sight too good"—Dick made a face—"and hasn't the foggiest notion of the kind of swine you are. What am I to say to her?"

"Send her to my diggings," said the Toff, making up his mind on the spot. "Send her to my diggings and I'll see what's to be done. She's not my daughter; I haven't got one, thank the Lord. But I think I know whose she is likely to be."

"More blackmail?" asked the Boss, with lifted eyebrow.

"Too late for that," answered Dick, composedly. "They are all dead."

"Cold-blooded devil," commented the Boss.

CHAPTER XII

THE HÔTEL BIENFAIT

As the train neared Paris, Maisie felt more and more discomposed. Sefton had left without any special farewell for her; and she hated herself for minding, and for wondering how he would greet her. The journey, and the packing, and the racking emotions she had gone through, had tired her horribly; and she felt unequal to the exertion of collecting her things or seeing to the various items of property in her charge. All she wanted to know was whether Sefton would meet them at Paris; and this she would not ask of either of her companions. And when the train rumbled in to the terminus, and the lights shone blindingly through the darkness, and the shouts of the porters and the banging of heavy luggage echoed along the platform, it seemed like a part of the weary dream that had begun with the Comte de Marinde and had given her back a mother of whom she was ashamed. Having strung herself up to the meeting with Sefton she was too tired out to think of it when it occurred. She knew, vaguely, that he had made a comfortable place for her in the fiacre, with something under her feet; and that he had almost carried her into the hotel and had made her drink some hot milk. After that there was a confused dream of being helped into a spotlessly clean bed which was a very long way to climb up to, the length of the stairs somehow merging itself into the height of the bed. A kindly, chattering Frenchwoman helped her to get off her clothes.

Then she woke. A sense of blessed restfulness per-

vaded her being. Every little movement of hand or foot seemed to give more and more ease and comfort. A delicious smell of coffee and new bread was wafted across her senses. Opening her eyes, she saw her mother in a dressing-gown, and a smiling chamberman with a tray. With some reluctance, she came back to existence, and answered her mother's inquiries sleepily. She was rested; she felt quite well; she would like breakfast very much; she would take it at once and not let it get cold.

Mrs. Pleydell retired, feeling that she had played a mother's part.

Maisie found the little hotel a very friendly spot. It was off the beaten track and had an old-fashioned *clientèle,* to whom the *patronne* was more a friend than a landlady running up scores. She sunned herself in the little garden with the trellised and embowered benches for summer customers; and went with the chatty *bonne* to mass at a big church hard by, and with the *patronne* herself to the Halles for the marketing. For two or three days she was left completely free, business of some absorbing kind engrossing all the rest of the party.

"Will you come with us this afternoon, Maisie?" said Lola, in the markedly cold fashion she had adopted towards the girl. "We want to settle into the new place as quickly as possible."

Maisie did not seek to know what the new place was; she never asked for explanations now.

"I can come if you want me," she answered.

Sefton looked acutely at first one, then the other. When Maisie came to the sitting-room with her hat on, she heard the end of an altercation.

"You will do what I tell you, Lola," Sefton was saying, in an inflexible voice. "I will go back to where I came from, sooner than have this sort of thing. She is to be treated properly and not made more miserable than neces-

sary, or else I will take her away; and then you can do what you damn well please."

Maisie's appearance stopped the discussion. All were conscious that she had heard something, but Sefton was perfectly composed. Mrs. Pleydell was very white and Lola very red; but the latter hummed a tune and took Maisie's arm with exaggerated chumminess to lead her downstairs. Her malicious glances reminded Maisie of Marie-Reine.

The new quarters were in a quiet narrow little street, two turnings from a big thoroughfare. The house stood a little back from the road, with a grilled enclosure before it. This enclosure was given privacy by a thick high hedge of privet inside the grille, and the walk up to the door was covered in. To the left of the entrance, a one-storied wing had been built out, with a wide low window looking towards the street, and a window at right angles to the door of the house. The door had handsome brass adornments and an elaborate knocker as well as a bell-handle; nevertheless it had in some queer way a furtive look and suggested secrecy and subterfuge.

A battered custodian admitted the party. Within were signs of furnishing activity, and a few workmen in overalls moving things about.

To the left of the front door they turned and entered a small room which had the window beside the angle. The room was fitted as an office, with a commodious desk, a broad table with typewriter, files, and ledgers; a revolving desk chair, and a large hall-porter's chair with an imposing footstool. A small electric heating apparatus stood in a recess; a work-table and low chair were in the window. The door opened in half, and the lower half had a shelf affixed which could be closed down flat if required. Figured muslin was drawn over the panes; and curtains and covers of the same material gave a

pleasing pink and mauve atmosphere. It had a most attractive appearance.

The wing at the angle contained two rooms and a sort of vestibule which opened into the main building. The front room was a comfortable bedroom with a broad sofa, and alongside it was a little room which caught at Maisie's heart.

A little room, with a cupboard at one end and a very wide low window. All white, with a "shadow" frieze that was pink and mauve and opalescent. Panelled walls in places; and a little sky-light, cunningly contrived with a shelter over it to keep the rain out. There were shelves, with flounces of white spotted muslin; the window looked out on a low wall bounding the adjoining premises, and in a strip of ground which lay between the two houses grew laburnum, lilac, syringa, and hawthorn. A great wistaria climbed round the wide window and drooped its pale clusters across the panes.

The small wing was for Maisie and her mother. The little room was Maisie's. In the office her mother was to interview the clients, and Maisie was to do the secretarial work. She would be paid fifteen francs a week.

The rest of the house was less interesting. It was done up in small suites, bed, dressing, and sitting rooms; some being bed and dressing rooms alone. The furnishings, while not expensive, were in excellent taste and gave an effect of light and airy freshness. Two neat attics in the roof were devoted to the servants; there was basement accommodation for luggage, cellarage, etc. On the ground floor was an extensive kitchen and service offices, of very up-to-date description. Lifts would run meals up to the different floors; and bathrooms and chambermaids' cupboards, sinks, linen-presses, and elaborate arrangements for shaving and shampooing were on the entresols.

When all had been inspected, a swing door off the hall,

to the right, was pushed back, and the party passed through. A prettily arranged lobby gave access to another suite, sitting-room, bedroom, and dressing-room. Lola's luggage was being brought in and placed in the bedroom.

"I take formal possession," she cried, swirling her skirts round in high good humour, and curtsying to herself in the long glass. "Let's drink luck to the new venture. Jim! What-ho! Without, there! Bring glasses, thou lazy varlet, and eke the champagne-wine, and fill the flowing bowl, or tumbler, or mug, or thingamy, to the very brim."

Sefton opened the champagne and poured it out. Maisie looked out of a window and saw that the little yard on this side as well as on her side had laburnum and lilac; but no wistaria. She was troubled at Lola calling Sefton "Jim," she had not known that to be his name; they had always hitherto called him Seffy. She would not look at him when he handed her the champagne.

"We are making a new start," cried Lola, raising her glass. "This is our little private lodging-house, and Jim and I are the *Patron* and *Patronne*, and Rips is the *Concierge* and Maisie Secretary. We shall run a legitimate business, and wax fat and prosperous. Here's to our fatness and prosperity."

They all drank. Maisie, in a way relieved at the explanation, began to hope that evil would be overcome with good. For, why need anyone be dishonest when they could get along by fair means? She greatly liked the idea of definite work and definite pay; the latter she could save, and thereby ensure a measure of independence if it became necessary.

The little room with the flowers had acted on Maisie's susceptibilities as oil on troubled waters. People could not be wicked in those dear little suites. Perhaps the nightmare was over, and she might be able to find peace.

They left the friendly hotel amid kind farewells and heartily expressed wishes for good luck. Maisie settled into the fragrant little room, helped her mother to unpack, rearranged some of the furniture, filled some vases with flowers, and converted the circular vestibule into a cheerful apartment where books, work and other odds and ends gave a homey air. The establishment supplied meals, which were handed in through a sliding panel in the communication door. In the evenings, the whole party dined together, at eight o'clock.

The days moved on in busy sequence, three sets of clients having come already. Two sets stayed for the week-end, the other took the rooms indefinitely, leaving some of their things, but only staying one night. In each case it was a lady and a gentleman.

Lola took charge of the management, making Maisie go round the establishment with her and give her wrinkles on all matters pertaining to the housekeeping; she also took the girl with her on the various shopping and marketing expeditions necessary to the upkeep of the house. Later on, she gave the marketing and ordering, as well as the accounts, entirely over to Maisie, busying herself with the tidying of the rooms, the care of the flowers, and the overseeing of the kitchen.

Their relations were cool, but civil; and conversation was limited to such matters as were under consideration. Lola never returned to her former manner of amused and jestful petting; there was evidently, even to Maisie's untrained mind, an underlying hostility. Maisie, however, cared too little about Lola's opinion to be interested in tracing the change to its source. She had never liked her and was glad to be spared the unwelcome effusions.

The staff consisted of a *chef* who came by the day and was waited on by a female assistant, a waiter and underwaiter, and two chambermen, who also blacked the boots and did the shaving and shampooing. Sefton's duties did

not appear to be so definite; he was always out a great deal. Clients came in satisfactory numbers; and the first six weeks in the new quarters were altogether satisfactory.

Maisie, however, carried a heavy heart. There was nothing in any way shady or unclean, so far as she could see, in their way of living now. Her accounts showed a growing and legitimate trade, and satisfactory profits. She did not know of those queer transactions with the police, nor that the skilful chamberman-barber was one of the *agents* on whose information so much depends in certain criminal and domestic cases. She did not know about the negotiations which had established her mother as *concierge*. She still had a good deal to learn. What troubled her was none of these things; but that she had not had one moment alone with Sefton since they came to Paris. More; not only had he sought no opportunity for one of those interludes the thought of which made her heart beat stormily, but he actually appeared to be avoiding any such opportunity of set purpose.

Resentment burned within her, and she was cold and almost rude in her manner to him. At night she lay awake with strangling thoughts; all day she hoped, and hoped, and hope was deferred. Meanwhile, her duties multiplied. The household linen required attention, and Maisie undertook to mark and mend and sort. The work carried her back to the High-class Establishment, at which she had "studied domestic science"; and she wondered what the Sisters Stutchberry and Mrs. Macleod were doing. She had not the heart to write to them.

She made up her mind to have an explanation with Sefton. If he had been making a fool of her, with his kisses and his soft words and his "sweetheart" and "dearest," she would not stay. She would put the world between them and never see him again. Did he really think that she would stay and work for him, after that? Work

for him at fifteen francs a week! Maisie's face dyed itself scarlet at the stinging thought.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to screw herself up to the point; and the weeks flew by, weeks of increasing prosperity and increasing work, during which the Hôtel Bienfait flourished like the green bay tree. And there came a day when Sefton so pointedly got himself out of Maisie's way, that, thoroughly nettled, she made up her vacillating mind and went to look for him of deliberate purpose.

Sefton was coming up from the cellar in the evening, where he had been packing and stacking the wines he had ordered with much careful forethought. His hands were dusty, and he was coatless, with his sleeves rolled up.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Sefton," said Maisie's cold clear voice, taking him by surprise. "There is something I want to say . . . to say to you . . . quite privately. Will you be so good as to say where, and when?"

He looked much as he might have done if she had struck him. It was not surprise, but pain, and even shrinking, which she saw in his eyes.

After a brief silence he spoke, low and quickly, breathlessly.

"You go out every Saturday, do you not?" She nodded. "Meet me next Saturday, four-thirty, the bottom of the street, not this end; to the right. I'll take you somewhere."

She nodded again, and gave him another quick glance. His eyes held hers for a space; then she dropped them and was turning away when, with a swift gesture, he threw back the swinging cellar door and motioned her inside. The door closed silently on them, and he had her in his arms.

A rush of hot kisses took her breath away. Her arms were round his neck, she held him desperately, while he kissed her in a passionate silence. And she kissed his

hard lips and his lean face as she had never yet done, hoping against hope that she might keep him and hold him, yet knowing in some way that she had lost him already.

Silently he released her, silently the swing door opened, and she passed back into the lobby, leaving him on the dark steps. Her thoughts were fixed on Saturday; Saturday, Saturday, Saturday; "I will take you somewhere." The words whirled in her head to a tune of alternating joy and despair.

She went about her duties with tingling cheeks and shining eyes, singing a little song to herself, to keep herself from despair. To-day was Tuesday; Saturday was four days off. There was something wrong or there would be no need for this mystery. It had been all very well at first; Maisie had felt shy and strange, and had been glad to shelter her feelings in secrecy; but since the scene in the sitting-room, when he had openly taken his right to kiss and hold her, there was no need for any further pretence. That he should keep it up gave her racking anxiety. Saturday, Saturday, Saturday, rang in her thoughts.

Lola pinched the scarlet cheeks and laughed—a horrid laugh. She attributed the alternate pallor and flush to anger and spite. Mrs. Pleydell knew better. She was at once a more acute and more experienced observer than Lola; and from the set of Sefton's lips and the softened glow in Maisie's eyes, she knew that there had been other love passages. Her daughter's attitude to her hurt even her blunted feelings; and she was inclined to be a little maudlin on the subject.

CHAPTER XIII

MAISIE'S MOTHER

PARIS was having a bad effect on Mrs. Pleydell. She had hankered after it; but it stirred too many memories to be safe. Memories of Baptiste the dearly loved, Marquis de la Ferronnière, who was now fat and married; memories of Ozzy Stokes, dead; memories of the husband whom she had grown to hate and fear but whom she had only been mildly tired of when he first brought her to Paris; memories, too, of another man, whose name she had never known but whom she had met at intervals in an *appartement entretenue* of which she had had the key for a few unquiet months, and of whose existence she believed no one but herself knew—the disturbing influence of these memories was undoubted; and the constant presence of Maisie and Jim Sefton raised another ghost—the recollection of the intrigue by which she had rid herself of Maisie's father. It had not been a reputable business; nor had its results been fortunate. Indeed, she could not think of the mess she had made without a kind of vertigo. It had been the chagrin consequent upon that fiasco that had driven her into intemperance; and it was also a source of constant fear and suspense.

"I wonder what that devil is doing now," mused Mrs. Pleydell. "What a fool I was not to have a bit more pluck. Sickening."

For the husband of her youth and the father of her only child she had not one tender thought.

And here was Maisie, with her saddened eyes and

shamed soul, mixed up in all this mess, and Seffy bragging that she was in love with him! What would Ozzy, or Baptiste, think of her? What would Maisie think, and say, if she knew? If once she knew, it would be dangerous; for, she might find and tell that devil. If only Jim and Lola would be careful, and not push things too far; but men were such idiots . . . How much easier it had been when she and Lola had the little "pub" at Richmond, when Jim was out of the way. Everything was so much easier, without a man hanging around and messing things up.

The excitement of keeping things going, of living from hand to mouth and of hunting down her day's or week's means of livelihood, had hitherto kept Rips from brooding. The security of the Hôtel Bienfait and the unruffled succession of its days were altogether demoralizing to one whose whole existence had been a craving for racket and excitement. Mrs. Pleydell was, all too evidently, sinking back into her old habits. Lola looked on troubled and cross; Sefton, when appealed to, sneered. Maisie, beyond being occasionally puzzled, had as yet no inkling of what was wrong.

Mrs. Pleydell had certainly had a good deal of whisky that evening that Maisie's scarlet cheeks had attracted attention; and although Maisie did not recognize that raw fact, her mother in some vague but startling way reminded her of someone she had once known, of something that had once happened. The impression was fleeting and could not be captured; but it came again and again. The tendency to be maudlin over her cold-hearted daughter became more marked as the drink took more effect; it was followed by still more maudlin resentment; and to the experienced observers who watched Rips's downward progress, an explosion of some sort was only a question of time.

Maisie often acted as her mother's substitute, in the

little office near the entrance; and she had learned that what the clients of the Maison Bienfait particularly insisted on was privacy and discretion. It struck Maisie at first as peculiar that there was this constant demand; but she had come to consider it as something that Parisians said from habit without any special significance.

The morning after her encounter with Sefton, Maisie was at her typewriter, and Mrs. Pleydell snoozed in the big chair, just out of range of the applicants who came to the half-door. Someone had come to the front door and knocked; and Maisie tugged at the latch-string which lifted the latch and admitted callers.

"Madame Bienfait?" inquired the new-comer, through the half-door of the office. Bienfait was accepted as the business appellation of the patrons.

The woman who asked was bloated and puffy. At some time or other she had been much stouter, but had fallen away; and the baggy skin sagged and hung in unsightly pockets. She was showily but shabbily dressed; and the once smart clothes showed signs of wear. Greasy surfaces and frayed edges, bulging boots, and mended gloves, made the palpably dyed hair and powdered skin look the more ghastly.

Maisie rose to attend to her. Mrs. Pleydell had been sipping whisky and soda, and was dozing it off.

"You desire an *appartement?*" asked Maisie.

"I wish to know the charges and accommodation of the house," said the woman.

Maisie read out the scale and then handed her the printed slip. The anticipated question came.

"Every privacy and discretion, of course?"

"Entirely," replied Maisie glibly. "A special lift service securing entire privacy for each *appartement,* meals served privately, confidential staff . . ." Maisie paused, thinking out other attractions.

"Très bien, très bien," approved the hag. Her voice

was one of those that came throatily, as if from under a blanket. "And what commission if I send you clients?"

Maisie had also heard this before, and knew the answer, and the dreadful-looking woman departed, after some offensive comment on Maisie's looks, which the girl only half understood but resented. Turning round, she saw her mother dodging behind the curtain, and straining to catch a glimpse of the woman without being seen herself. Her face was livid.

The visitor had laid down a card before going away; and seeing that her mother was awake Maisie took up the card which she had not looked at, to hand to Mrs. Pleydell. Her mother's strange behaviour arrested her. She stood with the card in her hand, looking at Mrs. Pleydell in surprise. The latter turned round and saw that she was observed.

"What is that?" she cried, shrilly, pointing to the road outside.

Maisie read the name on the card, wonderingly.

"'Madame Aimée Binon,
Atelier de Massage et de Manicure.'"

The card fell to the floor as mother and daughter stared at each other.

"What brought that harpy here?" raved Mrs. Pleydell. "She-devil; swine; house-fiend . . ."

"Mother, mother," expostulated Maisie.

Mrs. Pleydell looked at her sharply; then rushed across to Lola's rooms. Maisie did not see her again till evening and then her face was flushed and her eyes reddened; and once more came that fleeting likeness which Maisie could not catch.

Madame Binon! This fearsome-looking creature the woman who used to be in and out of their rooms, when Baptiste was with them! What had Baptiste been to them? Maisie set herself to think things out in the light

of her newly and painfully acquired knowledge. She remembered some of Baptiste's phrases; they had a new significance; her mother's gibes; they, also, had meanings —meanings which made Maisie hide her face in her hands.

It had come to this, that she was asking herself, had her mother ever really been married, or was she the worst kind of woman and was Maisie, her daughter, the child of some shameful intrigue?

By dinner-time Lola had laughed Rips out of the blues, and the meal was a particularly lively one. Every room in the place was taken for the ensuing week, and for several weeks after. Three of the tenants had agreements by the month; the profits on the drinks and the meals were beyond their most liberal computations.

"We are on velvet," declared Sefton. "Before the end of the year we shall have invested as much as it cost us to fit this out."

"Then," said Maisie, whose courage and aplomb were on a very different scale than when at *le Papa Rouxel's,* "perhaps you would be so good as to give me a rise in salary."

"Well, I'm blest!" ejaculated Lola. "You little Jew!"

"I think you are the Jew," said Maisie, calmly. "I was to do the secretarial work for fifteen francs a week, with my keep. That is very little, for confidential work; all your clients make a great point of the privacy and the confidential staff."

Maisie had no ulterior meaning behind her words; it merely struck her as a smart verbal score in the controversy; but the others believed her at last to have seen to the root of things, and to be trading on it. A Maisie who knew how many beans made five, and who stood in for her share of the profits, was a Maisie they could respect and understand and meet on equal terms; much more comfortable than the wide-eyed puzzled child, whose

honesty you could not shake, whose mind you could not fathom in its hopeless innocence of evil. Come; this was something like!

They sat up and listened.

"You make big profits and invest them; it means a provision for you, and you, and you," nodding at each. "But I do my share for which you do not pay me. Fifteen francs for confidential secretarial duties; and how much for marketing, and for my work as linen-maid? At the Hôtel de la Côte, there was a linen-maid who did nothing else; and was paid very well. I want my salary doubled."

"Very good," said Sefton, gravely. "You shall draw thirty francs from next Saturday."

The way he said "Saturday" brought the colour leaping to Maisie's cheeks.

"Does she know things, or not?" he asked, abruptly, when she had gone off to her own room.

"God alone knows, and He won't tell," said Mrs. Pleydell.

"Of course she knows," cried Lola. "What do *you* think! She knows, and she is going to stand in. She is not such a fool as she looks. And look here! She works like a brick; never slacks, never leaves over. What you trust her with is always all right; and she saves us no end of a lot, in heaps of ways. I propose that we set aside, say, one and a half per cent., for her. Bank it, and say nothing to her; but have it for her if she wants to get married, or if Rips old dear should hop it by any chance to kingdom-come. I wouldn't keep her then, so I warn you fair; not without you."

The idea was received with favour; all the more, that Maisie was not to know of it, and so the money could be taken for other purposes if needed! Nevertheless the three partners parted with quite a glow of generous feeling.

On the Friday morning, towards eleven, when Maisie had finished her marketing, the household clothes, and the orders, she was typing out a statement of accounts. Lola came to the half-door with a frowning face.

"Can you come and help me, Maisie," she asked. "There is some row or other in the kitchen, that I must attend to, and that woman has come for those things for cleaning and pressing. You know; the two evening cloaks, the coat and skirt, and those tapestry things that were altered; oh, and there is Jim's old evening suit and two sets of tweeds, and his light overcoat; you'll find them all there. Make a list, will you? The woman is in a hurry, she says."

Maisie let herself be hustled off, and in Lola's sitting-room found the various articles mentioned lying about. Lola came back before the matter was finished; and when the woman had gone, said coolly to Maisie:

"As you are getting more screw now, I can hand you over a bit more work. There are some towels and sheets I want specially kept for us, and not to be used for the *appartements*. They are to be marked Sefton, not Bienfait. You might just finish them for me, and all the other things you find in the heap. There they are, in the corner."

She flung the bedroom door open, and Maisie went in without protest and proceeded to investigate the heap. Some of the things, new and unsoiled, were marked and finished; these she folded. Of the others, she collected the towels and pillow-cases, made them into a heap, and sat on the still unmade bed to work. In the heap were some shirts, vests, and pants that certainly were not for Lola's wear. Maisie's heart beat quickly at the idea of handling Sefton's clothes and doing intimate little jobs for him.

She turned on the bed to get the light from a better angle. Lifting her eyes, and letting them wander over the

pillows as she broke the thread, she saw Lola's night-dress, folded and ready to be put into its lacy case, lying beside her. Flung over the top rail of the bed, and hanging over the furthermost pillow, was a pair of tumbled pyjamas. It was a minute or two before the significance of the sight broke on her mind; then the work slid from her lap unregarded on to the floor.

It seemed to her that she was being made to wallow in infamy. The thought of it choked her, made her dizzy, brought stars and spots before her eyes, and buzzing in her ears. To stop it somehow, this physical confusion, she got up and walked about. On the floor under a chair was a pair of socks, half inside out, cast aside for the wash; she turned sharply away. The dressing-room door stood open; within was confirmation strong and stronger yet.

Maisie walked into the dressing-room. There was a pair of man's hair-brushes; shaving tackle and a shaving stand and glass; an open cupboard with some well-known suits hanging in it; a half-open drawer, with handkerchiefs and ties. She knew the ties and the handkerchiefs. There was a dirty handkerchief on the dressing-table; Sefton was using it when she asked for more salary.

So Jim Sefton, who had made love to her—who only a day or two ago had showered those passionate kisses on her—lived here as man and wife with Lola Mount, passing, for the benefit of the staff and the clients, as Monsieur and Madame Bienfait. She had not known they carried the amiable pretence to that length!

Gathering up the linen and flinging it down in the corner, she ran to her own room and locked herself in.

Sobbing in helpless misery on her little white bed she had no notion whether Lola had sent her to her room on purpose, or whether she had overlooked the revelations it contained. Maisie did not know whether she was sup-

posed to know or not to know what was going on. She could come to no conclusion. The only thing that was certain was, that she was surrounded by infamies and that nothing seemed too vile for the people her hapless lot had cast her among.

Among the taunting thoughts that crowded her memory the idea of Saturday's assignation was the most importunate. She had been counting on it, as the one great boon that was coming to her. The irony of circumstance could not eat in deeper. Like the poor tortured soul in the ballad, Maisie's cry was, "I wis that I were deid, but I'm no like to dee."

A banging on her door brought her back reluctantly to questions of time and meals.

"I am not coming," was her curt reply to her mother's admonition that *déjeuner* was waiting.

Rips had been scenting battle for some days, and went to *déjeuner* in a temper that was getting out of control.

"She's not coming," she announced, in tones as curt as Maisie's own.

"Anything the matter?" asked Sefton, coolly.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Pleydell, testily. "Have you been falling foul of her, Lola?"

"I? Gracious, no! She came off with me like a lamb to mark the new linen. I turned her on to Madame Minotte first, and then left her in my room. She was all right then. I haven't seen her since." And then, after a moment's illumining thought: "Oh! I wonder, now! I never thought of that."

"What?"

But Lola went into screams of laughter and would not say anything more.

At three o'clock Maisie was in the office, at work to all appearances as usual. Her face was patched and her eyes dull and swollen; she neither spoke nor looked up when

Mrs. Pleydell came in. The weary day passed on; and at dinner-time she had her meal brought to the office. Mrs. Pleydell, in her uneasiness, was rapidly losing her temper, aiding the process with port wine and whisky. The partners had got to the stage when taunts are thinly disguised as jests, Sefton holding his tongue for fear of saying something too strong to pass for jest. Mrs. Pleydell was leaning her chair back and rocking it in a peculiarly irritating way of hers, before answering something Lola had casually dropped from her mouth, of a specially galling description; when the door opened and Maisie came in.

"I shall be glad of a few moments, if you can spare them," she said, icily but nervously. She was tingling with excitement from head to foot.

"I have made up the books to date and will finish everything to-morrow," she began again, "and shall be glad if either of you will go through them with me. I have the lists fully made out of linen, china, plate, and cutlery; and the dates are all entered for the people who are coming. You will find it all in order. The accounts are made up for the *appartements*, and when to-morrow's marketing is finished I will make up the tradesmen's books. There is nothing owing but this week's accounts which I will settle to-morrow before I go. I am leaving here by the afternoon train, for England."

There was dead silence.

"I shall be glad," addressing her mother, "if you will give me some information that will enable me to find my father's people. I should imagine they would rather take the trouble to find me some respectable position where I can support myself, than have me in an establishment of this sort, where one never knows what fresh infamy may crop up from day to day."

The studied insolence of voice and manner stirred the two older women like a whip cracked in their face.

"May we venture to ask," sneered Lola, after a disconcerting silence, "what fresh infamy has inspired you to take up this tone, since this morning?"

"Yes, you may ask," retorted Maisie, "although I wonder you like to. You sent me into your room this morning; and I found, from what I saw there, that Mr. Sefton is sharing it."

Her face went scarlet, then very white again, as she made her indictment.

"Why is that an infamy, may I inquire?" again asked Lola.

"I should not imagine it was, among the people you associate with. It is asking too much, perhaps, to expect you to understand the feelings of people brought up decently."

"Do I understand that where you were brought up, it is considered indecent for a husband to be in his wife's room?"

Ah! That got home.

Sefton's face was grey and set. Maisie never cast a glance at him.

"I suppose you could not imagine, in your immeasurable superiority, that I could have anything so respectable as a husband. But it is you, I think, who have made the *faux pas*, by having relations with my husband that his wife would not approve of."

Sefton thought Maisie would have fallen; but she waved his help away, and spoke bravely, in a voice that did not seem to her to be her own.

"I think you are the wickedest people I have ever heard of," she said. "I did not know it was possible for people, who are educated people and not low-lived and ignorant, to be so wantonly and indecently wicked. So shameless. I should imagine that there is very little you have not been guilty of, and I daresay you even murdered poor Mr. Torrance, as well as robbed him. It

would not surprise me. I do not care, as a matter of fact, what Mr. and Mrs. Sefton—or Mr. and Mrs. Mount, whichever it is—do or don't do; they are nothing to me; but that my own mother should have dragged me into this, should be the associate and accomplice of criminals and swindlers, and should try to make me one too—I can never forgive that, and I should not think God will either."

There was no heat in her speech; only hard, cold condemnation.

Mrs. Pleydell had been on edge all the evening, and had had more than enough to drink. When Maisie came in, she had been inclined to maudle over her; but the facts cast at her, so far short of the gratitude that, under the influence of port and whisky, she considered should have swelled Maisie's breast for the mother who had taken her from the dangers of Papa Rouxel's and sheltered her in her own home, made her uncertain temper blaze up uncontrolledly.

"There is something about honouring your father and mother, that God will have something to say about, too," she shouted, in her appalling voice. "You graceless little hussy, that I found in disgrace with a lot of blackguard men trailing after you; who are you to read us lectures! Your father's relations, if you please! Do you know what your father is? A convict; that is what *he* is. There are other people about who commit crimes, murders and all, besides us. And your mother, that has tried to give you a chance, instead of leaving you to your cursed father, or your Counts and your paramours—you can't forgive her, can't you? It will take a lot to make her forgive you, let me tell you."

The wretched woman lashed herself to greater fury with every sentence. Knowing her of old, neither Lola nor Sefton made any effort to stop her. The latter, in-

deed, thought that if Maisie knew the truth, once for all, she might be more amenable.

Getting up from the little round table at which they sat, Rips filled her glass again, gulping down a mouthful of the whisky neat before adding the soda. The sofa was near at hand and she flung herself on it, spilling some of the drink over herself, and saying "Damn," savagely. One leg was flung up on the sofa; her skirt was drawn up, by her attitude, almost to the knee. Maisie stared at it, fascinated, and then at the flushed swollen face, purple-blotched. In a moment the scene she had once before remembered came back. The woman who sprawled and shouted hideous things, the cowering child, the furious man; the blow, the row, the running people—"Ah!" she cried, in horror; and put up her arm as if to ward off a blow.

That shrieking woman had been her mother; the man who had struck the blow—who was he? Men did not hit women unless very intimate . . .

Scenting a fresh insult, Mrs. Pleydell raved on. The husband she had feared and loathed, his vile cruelty, her revenge on him in the tale that his child—of whom he had, very strangely, been fond—was dead; the horrible crime for which he was sentenced to a term of penal servitude; the degradation to which, in all probability, he had sunk now, were gloated over, insisted on, repeated *ad nauseam*. Maisie listened in a kind of hypnotic trance. But when there was a lull, she looked searchingly at her mother, and asked, "Who was the man you lived with at Mont Roselle, when I was small?"

Maisie was not prepared for the result. Mrs. Pleydell was maddened by this fresh insult; as a matter of fact, she did not relish the exposure of her ugly past through her own uncontrolled temper, and was furious at having been carried away so far. Rage past control seized her; she got up and sprang towards Maisie, tripping over the

stool, and falling, with the glass in her hand, full length on the floor. Her head struck against the corner of another chair, the glass shattered and cut her wrist.

Sefton and Lola ran to raise her; and finding her unconscious, laid her on the sofa. Not until they had tried, uselessly, to rouse her with cold water, did they see the serious injury to her wrist. In feeling for her pulse, the spouting blood caught their attention and terrified them. No one knew what to do.

It was the chamberman-barber who applied a tourniquet and prevented her from bleeding to death on the spot. A doctor was fetched, who shook his head ominously. The helpless body was carried to the other wing and laid on the big bed; and Maisie, still dazed with the hurrying events of the day, found herself installed as nurse. She knew little or nothing of serious illness, and the responsibility of the night that lay before her seemed appalling.

Little could be done for the patient save to pack her with hot water bags, keep the clothes over the twitching limbs, and supply cold drinks to the thirst that heavy loss of blood always entails. Consumed by this thirst, and racked with the discomfort induced by her rising temperature, and the spirits of which she had so immoderately partaken, Mrs. Pleydell passed a restless night. Towards morning she was violently sick.

When the doctor came, bringing a *bonne sœur* to help with the nursing, she was quiet again. The patchy purple of her face had given way to a sickly waxen; her eyes were half closed, her breathing irregular. The doctor, an Englishman, declared her to be not unconscious but suffering from shock; and that her condition at any moment might become critical. She must not be left, and he would call again in the afternoon. Glancing at Maisie, he added, "Send that child into the fresh air. Make her

have a good meal and a brisk walk. She looks almost as far gone as her mother."

Lola was uneasy in the sick-room, and she and Sefton whispered anxiously as they looked at "poor old Rips," speechless, helpless, and, perhaps, dying. A breakfast was served for Maisie and the *bonne sœur*, and then Maisie went for a walk as instructed. When she came back, it seemed as if the silent figure in the bed had been lying there for years and that there had never been any other life. It appeared impossible that it was only a night and half a day since that hideous scene.

Yet, there was a change. Mrs. Pleydell's colour was better, her position more natural; and the eyes were properly closed as if in sleep, not half open. Her breathing was more regular; the *bonne sœur* reported that she had spoken a word or two and that she had taken her nourishment easily. Maisie leant over the bed, in relief and hope, and seeing the eyes open suddenly, exclaimed "Mother!" on a note of gladness.

Mrs. Pleydell had never pretended to much affection for Maisie. She had a sentimental regard for the memory of two men who had been fond of Maisie, and a deep-seated hatred for the girl's father. She had felt she was somehow playing a pathetic and romantic part, in taking up the attitude of being Maisie's sole protector. This attitude had fallen to bits, under the influence of affront, temper, and drink; and the frame of mind aroused under the circumstances that led to her accident was the frame of mind that remained with her after the accident. She had, moreover, always believed that Maisie's inopportune reappearance had boded misfortune. On seeing her daughter, where before she had seen the little *bonne sœur*, and on hearing her say "Mother" with concern, she rose on her elbow with a heavy frown and a hoarse sound in her throat.

"You little snake," she exclaimed, furiously.

The *bonne sœur* hurried to lay her back on the pillows; the sick woman pushed her away and struck at her mercilessly, regardless of the fact that it was her wounded arm that she was leaning on.

"Where is that little devil?" she cried, while the *bonne sœur* shrank back and crossed herself, and Maisie stood rigid near the foot of the bed. "You young house-fiend, I knew you would bring us bad luck. From the moment I saw your calamitous face. . . . Curse you! Mother! You needn't say *Mother* to me. The daughter I never wanted, daughter of that hound that I got penal servitude for—yes, *I* got it for him, do you hear? I, and that lover of yours, that you have been hanging about and kissing—another woman's husband—kissing and spooning with the man who took five hundred pounds blood-money to put your father in gaol, to rid me of him. Why do you stay here? Why don't you go—go to your precious father, who thinks you are dead—go to him, and tell him to find out if you *are* his daughter or . . . ah! that would be telling! Why don't you go? Get out! Get out of this. Don't let me ever set eyes on you again."

She worked herself up, as she proceeded, to a crescendo of hoarse cries, and her face took on a diabolical expression. Mottled with purple, it seemed to swell; and at the last shriek of anger, she made a sudden and violent movement towards Maisie. The girl stepped backwards in haste, and the *bonne sœur* whispered imploringly:

"Vaut mieux vous en aller, chérie. Allez, vite."

Before she reached the door, her mother had sunk back on the pillows and the little sister leant over her, crooning, rearranging. Maisie had hardly got to her room, where she stood dazed and shocked, when a cry brought her back to the sick-room.

The dressing had shifted, and a widening stain was soaking into the bedclothes. This time the chamberman-barber's services came too late.

CHAPTER XIV

PERPLEXITIES

MRS. PLEYDELL died towards the following dawn, without speaking another intelligible word. If Maisie had been shocked at her mother's unnatural hostility to her only child, she was still more shocked at the matter-of-fact, callous fashion in which Lola and Sefton accepted the position. The idea that "it was better so; once she had gone back to the bottle she would have been a nuisance to herself and to everybody else," seemed to be the only one they were capable of entertaining in regard to the death of the old friend and associate who, in her way, had been a benefactress to them both.

Funerals take place quickly in France, and the last rites were soon performed. On Sefton's return from the cemetery Maisie spoke to him as he passed the office.

"Will you and Mrs. Sefton come and speak to me here, please?" she said.

When they came, Lola in a sneering mood, Maisie showed them that the common-sense precepts inculcated at the High-class Educational Establishment for Young Gentlewomen had not been sown in barren ground. Her subsequent experiences out in the world had brought the seed to harvest.

"I have packed my things," began Maisie, "and when the police inquiry is over, I shall leave. I have telephoned to the British Embassy that I would like to be taken to the railway station and seen off, as I do not trust myself in my present company; and they have communicated with the police."

The gasp of anger and amazement with which Lola greeted this statement repaid Maisie for the difficulty of making it.

"I have the money I have earned," she went on, "and I have found fifty-three pounds among my mother's things, which I shall keep. At first I thought I would not touch any of it, as it was not honestly come by; but I do not see that I shall do any good by leaving it for you, and going out penniless and starving myself. The same thing applies to my clothes, and to my mother's clothes and luggage, and the odds and ends that belong to her. I will leave you nothing that I can take away. And I want you to understand that I know you are criminals, and that if ever I hear anything which causes me to think I ought to make that knowledge public, I will make it public."

"Thank you for all your interesting information," said Lola, making a great effort at self-control. "Is there anything you would like to know in return?"

"Yes, there is," replied Maisie, ignoring the sneer. "I want to know what my mother meant when she said Mr. Sefton took five hundred pounds blood-money to get my father into prison, to rid her of him."

If she had cast a bomb-shell between them, she could not have given them both a greater shock.

"Rips told you that?" cried Lola; and turned an accusing face on her husband.

"We need not wash our dirty linen before her," remarked Sefton, indicating Maisie with a jerk of his head; and Lola subsided.

"Are you not going to tell me?" asked Maisie. "At any rate, you can tell me where my father is to be found, seeing that he is evidently not dead, as I always believed."

"By all means," answered Sefton, suavely. "He is to be found at a sort of thieves' kitchen, called the Vaults, off Mauleverer Street, Theobald's Road. He has been

long enough out of prison to be very glad of the fifty-three pounds you will take him."

"I suppose you would not know that unless you had been in prison too," observed Maisie, amazed at her own astuteness. She jotted down the address given.

"And I suppose that your mother must have told you all about that!" retorted Lola.

"You may go on supposing," replied Maisie, calmly.

She saw, intuitively, that her action in placing herself under the protection of the Embassy had altered their perspective. They were more cautious, more hesitating. She felt stronger, safer, more confident in her own judgment, now she knew that Sefton was a gaol-bird too. She wondered whether the Paris police knew that.

"Am I to tell my father, when I find him, that it is to you he owes his imprisonment?"

"You would be very unwise to do that," smiled Sefton; but Maisie noted that Lola drew a quick breath and that her face took a troubled aspect.

"Come, Maisie," went on Sefton, coolly, "I know that we have done badly by you in a way; but on the other hand we have saved you from worse. It is no use holding Lola and me responsible for the—er—faults and disadvantages of your parentage—we just took things as we found them. You can't fail to understand that your arrival on the scene was an embarrassment, things being as they were; and as they were so, past praying for, we did the best we could for ourselves. Remember this to our credit, Lola and I; we were not prepared to sacrifice our friend, your mother, to any sentimental consideration for her daughter—the daughter of the man who sent her to the devil; flogged her, and then deserted her—with another girl that he killed by ill-treatment when he found he could not get her money."

"It is easy to say that; my father is not here to give

his version," retorted Maisie, though her heart sank. "I shall hear what he has to say . . . "

"Take my advice, my girl; and I give it you for your own sake, not for mine," said Sefton, earnestly. He strode up to Maisie and took her by the shoulders. "Your father is a vicious beast, even from my point of view—a cold calculating devil, who will use you . . . as we have never done or thought of doing. If it came to that, you would be safer with us! I took money for giving him to justice, true; but it was a foul thing that he was wanted for, and suspicion fell on another man who was ruined and driven to suicide by it. I did not know your father then; I only knew of him; but I got to know later on, when I was doing time in the same penal settlement. There was not a man there who did not fear and loathe him. Brutes as most of them were, he was too cold-blooded for them."

Maisie was plainly shaken.

"I wish to goodness," he pursued, seeing his advantage, "that I could remember the names of your people. Your father, and his father, were only sons—your grandfather an only child. But Pleydell had two sisters, married in India—one died; but both had children; your cousins. I can't remember their names, worse luck. But your aunts were Pleydells of Pleydell's Covert in Buckinghamshire. You might surely trace them by that. And your mother was in reality what they all say they are, a clergyman's daughter. She had four sisters, and ran away from home to go on the stage. Her stage name was Meta Rippingsley, I can't remember her real name; but those people are your relations too. Look here, Maisie; stay with us until the Embassy can trace some of those people for you. I swear you shall not be interfered with or annoyed in any way, and I am very sorry we all gave way to such rough talk. Lola, you will stand to that, won't you?"

Lola nodded carelessly.

Maisie was nonplussed. The offer was so sane, so

eminently common-sensible, it might seem ridiculous not to accept it. On the other hand, it would be revolting to her pride to be given protection by the people from whom she had asked to be protected. Her distrust of their motives was profound; her fear of doing something irretrievably rash or foolish, equally profound. While she hesitated the sound of footsteps came to the front door, the bell rang; and Maisie, who was performing her mother's duties temporarily, was called upon to interview the representatives of the law. Two officers in the uniform of the Paris police, and a plain-clothes gentleman of extreme urbanity, formed the visitation.

Mrs. Pleydell having died by an accident, there were formalities of various kinds to be gone through. Her personal property was inventoried, and the household questioned on several matters. Maisie had been at some pains to explain, in her communications with the police, that the accident had taken place in her presence and that all that could be done for the victim had actually been done; there was no suspicion of anything but a most unfortunate accident. After a lot of fussing, the very considerate officials who did the fussing conveyed to Maisie the mandate that she was to accompany them to the headquarters of their department. They did not know why; that Mademoiselle's presence was required, was all they knew.

Maisie went off with the urbane plain-clothes gentleman in a cab, feeling much bewildered, and was driven to the big departmental block in the Rue de la Quaie Neuve. After a considerable time spent in waiting, she was forwarded, through several sub-departments and up innumerable flights of stone stairs, to her destination, where, in a moderately well-furnished office, a purplish person received her with a low and ultra-French bow.

The purplish person had too much flesh on his neck, on his wrists, on his haunches, everywhere. His clothes, besides, were a little too tight for so much flesh. He had

a bald patch on the crown of his head, and a series of arched wrinkles on his forehead following and emphasizing the arch of his scanty eyebrows. His purplish complexion had a mottled character, and his fingers had tufts of hair between the joints. Tufts of hair also projected from his ears. His eyes, level with the face and with full eyelids, had this peculiarity, that the whites showed permanently between the lower lid and the iris. An air of complacency and of conviction of good looks gave a finishing touch to objectionableness to a repellent personality.

After the elaborate bow, he extended one of the tufted hands, and when Maisie laid hers within its grasp, he bowed again and kissed her fingers with his fleshy lips. He then wheeled up a chair, while she furtively rubbed her hand against her skirt to get rid of the feel of his salute. They sat, she with her face turned slightly from the light, he at an angle at which he could watch her closely. He began the conversation in fluent if slightly unusual English.

"I haff furze to express my profoun rgret at the loss you haff eprouve," he opened up. "Madame your defonc Mozzer has been snatch from you ver sudden. It is mose desolate for you."

"It was very sudden," murmured Maisie, agreeing to that extent with his statement of fact.

"And you are leff alone; your fazzer, he iss too diseased?"

"Too diseased . . . ?" asked Maisie, puzzled; and then, as light broke on her, "Oh! No. I believe he is still alive. He and my mother did not live together."

He nodded, as one who understood.

"An you assk, you should be proteck, as you do not truss the pipple off ze houze?"

Maisie asked herself now, would she be much better

pleased with this person for a protector than with Sefton. Her heart sank. The world seemed bristling with unimaginably objectionable people.

She considered for a moment.

"I do not like or trust those people," she said, presently, "and I cannot possibly stay with them long; but they have made what seems a very sensible—and kind—suggestion, that I should stay there until the British Embassy can make inquiries to find my relations. My mother had several sisters, and so had my father."

She stopped, feeling that somehow or other she was knocking the bottom out of her case for protection.

The fleshy gentleman nodded, and accompanied his nod with little beats of his lumpish hand.

"Ver sainzebelle. But now, who are ziss pipple? What haff they make, for you to not truss them?"

This was the question Maisie feared.

"I do not feel I can tell you that," she said, with a troubled air. "I do not know much about the world, and I cannot tell just how serious or how trivial the things I have minded would be thought by others. They are personal, in some ways. But there is a great deal that has gone by . . . when people have led reckless, immoral lives and have no proper standard of conduct, you cannot feel safe with them, you may find yourself at any time mixed up in things you have a horror of . . . "

She looked at him in perplexity, wondering if he understood; and once again he nodded reassuringly.

"Yess. Yess. An you are zo yongue. It would be for you mose difficul. And iff we halp you to go to Anglan, where would you to go, if spose the Em*bassy* cannot fine your famalee?"

"There is my father," she said, hesitatingly.

"Doss he assk you, doss he wannt you?"

"He does not know I am alive," faltered Maisie, who

in her incorrigibly romantic imagination was gradually building up the image of a lonely, sorrowing, embittered parent, wronged, bereaved, falsely accused, suffering unjustly, to be restored to the joy of life by the reappearance of the long-lost daughter, who would reveal to him the sordid intrigues woven round his good name and his liberty.

The other regarded her steadfastly, with something in his expression of pity and yet of pleasure.

"Mademoiselle," he said at length, "I who spik to you will atvice. I peliff that you can do nossing better than stay wiss ziss pipple ontil the Em*bassy* haff make research I will see, and the Em*bassy* will see, that you will be save. You shall wade a liddle, and then, if no worn can fine your famalee, then I aweel haff zomething to propose to you, before you go to your fazzer. You will wade, yess?"

"If you think it is the wisest thing I can do, yes, I will wait," answered Maisie. "And you will see that I am not annoyed, or interfered with; and that my mother's money and things are not taken?"

"Woss there mosh monny?"

"There is about fifty-four pounds, in English money, and clothes and things. It is all I shall have to start with, if my father will . . . cannot have me."

"All?" There was amusement and slight surprise in the throaty voice. "But by no means, mademoiselle. Your defonc mozzer was part owner off the establishment, and you inherit your share, off all the monny she invess, and off all the profits they haff make. The ress belong to your fazzer."

Here was an unexpected complication!

Maisie's naïve surprise and bewilderment amused the fleshy gentleman. He laughed throatily, and patted her knee, and said many encouraging things in unfamiliar

English. And he finally sent her back to the Hôtel Bienfait with a message to Sefton to say, that Monsieur Robert presented his compliments, and he had counselled Mademoiselle Plédelle to remain at the Hôtel while inquiries were being made for her family.

"Meesta Seffton 'e know me quite well, and it will pe enoff," affirmed M. Robert.

CHAPTER XV

OF FATHERS

COMING back to the Hôtel Bienfait, after all her defiance and her plan-making, fell rather flat; and in phraseology reminiscent of her school days, Maisie "felt no end of a fool." Determined to keep that part of her sensations to herself and to put a good face on things, she went without delay to Lola's rooms. Knocking, and going in at the response, she announced that she had just returned from the Préfecture, and that she was charged with a message to Mr. Sefton from M. Robert.

"And who might M. Robert be?" asked Lola, staring affrontingly.

"He is someone in the police. Mr. Sefton knows all about him," answered Maisie, full of covert hostility. The sight of this woman, who had let her husband make love to her—Maisie—so as to get influence over her to use her for their ends; and who had then had the insolence to be jealous; never failed to stir Maisie's blood to storm pitch. Maisie remembered the story she had been persuaded to tell about poor young Torrance. Her head sang whenever she thought of it.

"H—m," was Lola's response. She reached out a hand and rang the bell; and after some time, during which Maisie stood absolutely silent and still, Sefton was found and produced. He came in swiftly, and looked from one to the other.

"Is there anything wrong?"

"No, I don't think so," answered Maisie. "I have had an interview with a M. Robert, and I told him of the kind

suggestion you and Mrs. Sefton made, that I should stay here while the Embassy people make some inquiries about my relations. And he asked me to present you his compliments and to say that he thought it would be far the best thing, and that he would communicate with the Embassy and say that was what had been arranged. So," turning to Lola, "if you have objection, I will keep my room for a little; and if you want me to see to the linen, and the secretarial work, I shall be glad to go on doing them until I leave."

"H—m," was again all that Lola said.

So Maisie went back to the little white room and unpacked some of her things again. It was a very eerie feeling to be all alone in the wing with the big empty room in the front and the memory of what had lain there. It was Maisie's first acquaintance with death; and its awfulness, its irrevocableness, lay heavy on her soul. She tried not to think of those last terrible scenes—the panting, struggling breaths, the long gasping breaths, the fainter and fainter breaths with longer and longer gaps between; and then the shuddering breaths, the rattling breaths . . . and no breath. Maisie shook herself, and shrugged something away with her shoulders, and set herself resolutely to think of her situation, and to plan out her path with due regard to the more favourable financial situation disclosed to her by M. Robert.

She would, she made up her mind, go through the ledgers and inform herself of the amount she could claim; and after using just what was necessary to keep her going until she got work, the rest should go to some place where out-of-work girls could get shelter. Her father's share —he did not know about this. He was, said Sefton, in a thieves' kitchen; it probably meant that he had come out of prison with nothing, and had to do what he could. He would surely welcome her, with such tidings? For Maisie, mindful of the reception she had been given by one parent,

was tremblingly aware that the hearts of parents had other possibilities than love in regard to their offspring.

Maisie was beginning, however, to harbour the conviction that her father was an ill-used victim and that she was destined to bring him renewed hope and rehabilitation. She discounted much that Sefton told her, in the new light shed by the fact that she, and her father, were joint partners in the Hôtel Bienfait. Of course he did not want her to go to her father, who would be quite sharp enough to know what his rights were! She could see it quite clearly; and marvelled that she had let herself be taken in. There was also the little matter of blood-money. . . . It was even possible that he had been falsely accused!

She would go to the Embassy and say that if there was likely to be much delay in getting into touch with her aunts and cousins, she would prefer to go to her father. As for the plan which M. Robert claimed to have in reserve she never thought of it again.

She could not stay long at the Hôtel Bienfait. She hated the sight of Lola; hated her to her very bones. Scorn and disgust for the woman who could lend her husband to such a purpose and then condescend to be jealous . . . Maisie's blood raced passionately round in her veins, throbbing and pulsing, making her dizzy. How pitiful and tragic it had all been . . . how sordid, how shameful. Thoughts and memories struck her like whiplashes, and she had to get up and walk about. She could not sit still.

Poor young Torrance! Had he been indeed and in truth murdered? She feared so. In any case he was robbed—she understood a little of what part it was she herself had been made to play. A false accusation of cheating which he could not disprove—Sefton's craft with cards was almost diabolical—and he had gone off to hide his misery. Sefton had gone too, and had demanded from

him the return of the money won from his friends. Probably had demanded with threats all that he had—the "huge pile" he had made that day at the tables. Then Torrance had shot himself, or been shot—and the neighbours came in, Sefton having all the money about his person. Had there been other than a *sympathetic inquiry,* evidence would have been given about all that money, and the question of where it had gone would have been raised. Maisie was dragged in, the story of a sad love affair spread; the men who were present at the supposed cheating would think that the best had been made of it; no one would make inquiries. She, Maisie, had told that lie which saved the money for Sefton, and enabled them to come straight to the Hôtel Bienfait and take it over—lock, stock and barrel.

Maisie shuddered and gave little cries to herself. She remembered that dreadful vision of the shouting woman on the sofa and the forcible conviction that it was her mother. The other shouting woman was worse; the woman who had tried to strike her, and had fallen. Mother! How hideous to think it was her mother. What did girls do, who had those mothers! Maisie burst into bitter tears of shame and misery.

There was Baptiste; she could not place him, without further shame. She remembered some of the vile phrases her mother had used to him. Madame Binon—that horrible hag who wanted a commission, "the usual commission," on customers sent by her — what were those customers, what was the Hôtel Bienfait, that Maisie was partner in? That dreadful hag had been her mother's associate, had "found" Baptiste. . . . Maisie could not bear the horror of the thoughts that crowded in, the explanations — the only possible explanations! And M. Stöqué'ss?

There were those blighting, searing things her mother shouted at her—a father who ran away from his wife and

child and left them in a garrison town, with a young girl whom he believed to have money; and when he found he could not touch it, let her die of neglect and misery. That need not be true like that; she must hear her father's story first. Made to believe his child was dead, for revenge! A woman who did that, and who actually lived with the man again, keeping the knowledge of his child secret—what a woman to have for a mother! A father who was a convict, sentenced for a vile and cruel fraud, feared and loathed by his fellow convicts—what a man to have for a father! That man who made love to her, under the eyes of his own wife, to make her useful and submissive—what a creature to have loved! Those kisses, those silent clasps . . . Maisie went over it all with burning face and sick shamed heart, wild with furious revolt.

The darkness closed in, as she walked up and down, flung herself on her bed, got up again, stood at the window, mechanically tidied here and there; ever and again shrugging off the imaginary contact of all these evil memories. It was with a start she realized it was dark; and turned on all the lights. Her dinner was brought to her room at her request; and when finished, there was little she cared to do. A nervous restlessness afflicted her; the room next door seemed to be alive with noises. There *was* a noise! That was a real noise, not an imaginary one.

The door opened, and Maisie almost fainted with terror. What she expected to see she could not have told; but it was with sobbing relief that she saw Jim Sefton's tall figure cross the threshold.

Steadying herself with difficulty, she asked him what he wanted.

"I want to talk to you," said Sefton.

"I am sorry I can't return the compliment," retorted Maisie, haughtily. "You can hardly expect me to be

very anxious for your society. Does Mrs. Sefton know you have come to my rooms?"

"No," replied Jim, rather brutally, "and she had better not, or there would be a row. Don't be a goose, child. You must know—you can't help knowing how I think of you. Do you imagine I could let you drop as if you were a mere acquaintance?"

Maisie stood irresolute, unable as always to resist an appeal to sentiment. She had arrived at some estimate of this man's character which taught her that, unscrupulous rascal though he was, his feeling for her was the most genuine one he had, next to his determination to get money by fair means or foul.

"You have no right to talk to me like that, and I will have any kind of row rather than allow you to do it," she said slowly; "but I think you are sensible enough not to risk rows. If you really want to show me that you have some decent feeling left that I can appeal to, tell me the truth about my father and mother . . ." she stopped, feeling it all to be too hopeless.

Somehow, they found themselves sitting side by side.

"The less you know about that the better," said Jim, harshly. He hesitated, a prey to the remnants of a conscientious scruple; but Maisie's impatient shrug, and contemptuous "Oh!" spurred him on. "I don't know how many men your mother had hanging round, first and last. She was a splendid looking woman. It was only your likeness to him that made her sure he was your father. You laugh like him. Even in prison he laughed like that. He was younger than her, and picked her up when she was on the stage and he a vicious young pup squandering his money in town. He gambled, and let her get men to come; and then flogged her because things were said about her and some rich man he was fleecing. She was marked all over. Beat her with the buckle-ends of two straps. Then he left her, bolted with an unlucky fool of

a girl, and wrote for you, because he thought he was fond of you; and she paid him out by pretending you had died the week he ran away. He sent money for a tombstone, and she had a high old beano with it. Later he found her again when the other girl was dead and Rips was doing an amazing show in living statuary. It went like smoke, and he made her take him on again, although she had Stokes in tow. She was mortally afraid of him. He had been in a big swindle and made a pile, but had lost most of it; and she was in funds just then. She found out he was in the swindle, through some slip of his, and that another man was being hounded out of business under undeserved suspicion. I was on my beam-ends then, and Stokes, a man she wanted badly, got her to be decent to me. She fed me, in fact, and gave me some of her husband's things; she would have done anything for Stokes. But she was terrified her husband would take some devilish revenge if he found out. She was always afraid of his marking her face; in fact, he had threatened to; and she was sure he would never divorce her to let her marry Stokes. Old Stokes was an awfully good sort. No end of a gambler, and a temper like a stallion; but as soft as butter in between whiles. She put me on to the reward the firm offered for information about the swindle, and gave me the proofs in black and white; and I got five hundred pounds, and your father got fifteen years. A man had actually been murdered—not by your father, but he knew all about it—to prevent him turning King's evidence. I can't remember the ins and outs, but this other poor chap was being falsely accused of the murder. When your father got his dose, he wrote your mother that he was sorry for her sake, because he had been about to divorce her to let her marry Stokes; and that nearly drove her mad. It was what made her take to drink. But I think he had never meant anything of the sort, it was only his sweet way of

making himself agreeable to the very last. He came out a little while ago, and Rips was always in terror he would find her, and find you! She had to hide you, when he turned up, and I helped her keep you out of his way; but she reproduced you, all alive, oh! after he had gone to jug; and Stokes thought a lot of you. But she couldn't run straight; and when he went to South Africa, because of her intemperance, she took up with a Frenchman, instead of reforming and trying to pull straight, as she had promised. Stokes came back unexpectedly, and found them together in Paris. He wasn't much overcome, because he knew she had become impossible; but he made her go into an inebriate home to give her one more chance; and you were put to school at his expense. He died awfully suddenly, and made no provision for anything, and the Frenchman sent money for your school, but Rips and Lola blew it, over a pub at Richmond, and a bad illness Lola had.

"I got jugged for something about a cheque—it wasn't the first time—and was in the same place with your father. That was the first I saw of him, after all I had heard of him. He is a poisonous creature, handsome, and I suppose attractive; but a fair devil. Don't go near him, little Maisie. Promise me you won't."

He caught her hand, and she rose, irresolute, and horribly shaken by his candid story. It is beyond doubt that he would have got her promise to avoid her father, in that moment, if he had not been moved to use the opportunity for a less legitimate purpose. As she turned her fair face towards him in perplexed distress, he caught her in his arms and kissed her hungrily and breathlessly regardless of her struggles.

"Oh! You hound. How dare you?" she gasped, at last escaping from him. The dangerous whiteness of his face scared her and she darted to the door. As she got it open, he took the handle from her hand, and walked

through before her, turning to say, in a strained voice, "You won't forget that. You can't forget it. This much belongs to me, anyhow, that I was the first."

Angrily she slammed and bolted the door after him. Whatever good impression he had succeeded in making was obliterated.

CHAPTER XVI

A WOULD-BE PARENT AND A PARTING

THE days succeeding her visit to the Préfecture were spent by Maisie in waiting for news from the Embassy. They passed uneventfully and she found them very trying. In her suspicious, exasperated frame of mind, it seemed as if she were doing something shameful in taking part in the smallest degree in the doings and the business of the Hôtel Bienfait; yet to stay there and be kept without doing her share seemed equally odious. A call at the Embassy broke the monotony; and Maisie was much pleased with her courteous reception at the hands of a fashionable and doubtless efficient young nobleman. But no news had yet been received of Maisie's scattered relations.

A stolid official at New Scotland Yard had traced these relations, however, with little difficulty. Meta Rippingsley was well-remembered in her professional capacity; and one theatrical agent had her real name. It was, indeed, this same enterprising gentleman who had christened her Rippingsley for stage purposes. Her name was plain Brown; and the Reverend Mr. Brown had held a beggarly curacy at Cheltenham. Inquiries there had elicited the facts that Mr. Brown had died in extreme poverty; that one daughter had married another curate who had taken her to China to missionize; another had died; and the two others were teachers in Australia. Of Mr. Pleydell's sisters, one had died in India, leaving a son who was in the Indian Army and a husband who had married again with the greatest possible speed; and the

other had married an Indian Civil Servant who was now retired and at home with his family.

Mrs. Chetwynde was a gentle, friendly soul, and had always thought of her disreputable brother with a pathetic despair. Her husband's temper, which was of the kind attributed by old-fashioned novelists to all Anglo-Indians, forbade any open allusion to this abiding sorrow. The scapegrace's name was never mentioned in Judge Chetwynde's presence; and the least allusion to him was the signal for an outburst of the famous temper. When, therefore, Mrs. Chetwynde heard an extraordinary uproar in her husband's study, on the occasion of a visit from a strange man, and hastened to the spot, she was not surprised to hear her brother's name.

The front door was violently slammed after the retreating stranger by the raving Judge, who, almost incoherent with passion, ejected his visitor from the premises. Mrs. Chetwynde was overpowered with a volley of abuse which was, she later discovered, directed not at herself but at the departed caller.

When calm, or comparative calm, supervened, Mrs. Chetwynde learned that her husband had been approached to know whether he would shelter the derelict daughter of his convict brother-in-law. This was an outrage so intolerable that it took hours to allay his indignation.

"But who sent them to you, Henry?" repeated Mrs. Chetwynde, for the twentieth time.

"Who sent them? What right had they to send? What the devil do they mean by associating me with your blackguard brother . . ."

"Yes, Henry, all right; never mind now. I want to know who 'they' are."

"So far as I could make anything out from that egregious fool who dared to come here with that perfectly monstrous story—*I* give a home to a convict's daughter! *I!*"

"You have not told me yet who asked," persisted patient Mrs. Chetwynde.

"The British Embassy in Paris," roared the Judge. "They have got hold of some disreputable girl there and want to foist her on me."

He stormed up and down the study; and it was long before any idea of the facts was grasped by his unlucky wife. She, seeing the other side of the story, felt her heart sink at the thought of the helpless girl whom no persuasion in the world would induce her husband to allow her to succour.

The end of it was that, without her husband's knowledge or sanction, she wrote confidentially to the British Embassy, enclosing a sum of £25 and a letter for her niece.

Maisie got this letter one cold rainy day when her spirits were at the lowest. The kindly expressions in her unknown aunt's handwriting gave her great comfort and pleasure; but the gist of it all was that nothing would move her uncle from the position he had taken up and it was useless to hope for a home with her own people.

What Mrs. Chetwynde proposed was that she should take a room for Maisie at a quiet hotel in Bloomsbury, which she would pay for in advance for the girl; and that she would make an early opportunity for running up to town to see her and talk over prospects. Maisie was to answer through the British Embassy; and let her aunt know the date of her probable departure. Maisie almost wept with joy, and closed with the offer without one minute's hesitation. It was an unspeakable relief to know that she had respectable relations and that one of them, at all events, was prepared to help her into a new way of life.

She sent her missive to the Embassy; and the Embassy in due course forwarded the enclosure to Mrs. Chetwynde. It also notified M. Robert that the affair appeared to be

satisfactorily settled. M. Robert sent round to the Hôtel Bienfait, asking Mademoiselle Pleydell to be so good as to give him an interview, at his office, at her earliest convenience.

Lola and Sefton were both in the office when this message came.

"Who and what is M. Robert?" Maisie asked, bluntly.

"A very useful person," answered Sefton, drily.

"Why does he interest himself so much in my affairs?"

"I should think he had better be left to explain that for himself."

"Is there any other horrible thing that I have to find out?" asked Maisie, bitterly, looking from one to the other.

Sefton was silent; but Lola strolled up to Maisie in her indolent way and took the girl by the shoulders.

"It would have been a good sight better for you, young woman, seeing that you are your mother's daughter, if you had been born a trifle less fastidious. As things are, you've got a lot to swallow. Better not worry about what they are made of; open your mouth and shut your eyes, is the best motto for you."

"If I have got to swallow them I have got to know what they are," replied Maisie, aghast at the prospect of fresh revelations.

"Take our advice, Maisie; don't ask to know too much. You are poor old Rips's girl, when all's said and done. You can't get away from that; and no blessing is likely to come of exposing your mother's mistakes and weaknesses. You are her daughter, you know; and if you want to make yourself out so much her superior, begin with a little charitable silence about her past. I know you will say we might have set you the example; but then we don't set up to be saints! Let your mother's past alone, now; and don't try to stir up any more mud. I said I wouldn't be paid to keep you, if your mother

died; but now she is dead, poor dear, I'd do a good deal for her . . . Stay with us here, if you like. The business is a perfectly legitimate one. It may not be strictly moral, but it is absolutely honest—no one is cheated or overcharged. Stay here; and don't go routing out that father of yours. You don't know what you are doing . . . let sleeping dogs lie . . ."

Lola spoke with unusual feeling. She had to "play the game" with poor old Rips's daughter, no matter what had come and gone.

Maisie struggled with her feelings.

"I think you mean most kindly, and I do thank you, very sincerely," she faltered. "But I can't help knowing that you don't really want me; and I should be—very unhappy—if I stayed. It isn't possible—no matter how kind you are—for me to stay in the same house with Mr. Sefton."

She brought this out with difficulty, but was brave enough to say it with a steady voice.

Lola nodded.

"Well, that's natural, too. I expected you would feel like that. I haven't got those sort of feelings myself—but there you are! Anyway, Maisie, promise that you won't go to your father. These relations of yours, they are not very helpful; but you might get a decent job through them. Only don't go to your father."

"I couldn't exactly promise that," stammered Maisie. "I will think over what you say, and I will do nothing rashly. But I could not *promise* that, not definitely."

Lola shrugged her shoulders and abandoned the effort. She had done the decent thing, but could not go on bothering about it. Sefton followed her silently out of the office.

Maisie went off to the Préfecture, to keep the appointment made by M. Robert, in an undecided frame of mind. Lola had seemed in earnest; but against that was the

knowledge that they certainly would not want Mr. Pleydell to know of the establishment Bienfait, in which he would infallibly cut in for his share. Mrs. Pleydell had died leaving no will; and Maisie knew that by English law, the husband is the sole inheritor from an intestate wife. She did not know how far French law could intervene. Her father would doubtless lose no time in finding out. Also there was the little matter of the blood-money; it would not be to their liking if she told her father that!

At the Préfecture was M. Robert, fleshy, purplish, sleek. His manner was more effusive, and more possessive than before.

"Zo we haff hear," he began. "Madame ze annt, she cannot sharge 'erself. She only will take a leedle tropple. Watt will you make, Mees Mezzée, when now you know how ogly zese pipple all be'ave?"

"I did not expect them to give me a home," answered Maisie. "I never thought of asking that. If my aunt will help me a little, and advise me about getting work, I shall be very grateful. It is all I should have asked for or expected."

M. Robert looked amused.

"It is not good you should talk of wark," he expostulated. "You are mosh too preety. It would be mose inconvenient. You haff foun' it so, already, yess?"

Maisie was silent for a moment, and then said:

"I could go to my father if everything else failed."

"Ah! Your fazzer. He is not a good fazzer for you to seek. He is a ver' bad man, oo haff been in prison. And iss e your fazzer, truly? Who can say?"

"I do not know what you mean," said Maisie, looking at the leering, complaisant face as it came closer and closer to hers.

"Loog at me well, Mees Mezzée. Doos not a heart-

call tell you? Haff you not guess? Why do I so mosh interest make, haff you not assk yourself?"

He paused melodramatically and drew back, fixing his fishy gaze on her with that intolerable smile. Maisie was on the alert, prepared to defend herself against she knew not what.

"It is me, Mees Mezzée, who are your fazzer," he announced, grandiloquently; and crossed his arms to watch the effect of the announcement.

Maisie's voice sounded far off to her own ears, the office seemed to swing and sway, and the grotesque figure before her appeared to be coming and going to and from great distances; but she rallied bravely to the shock and met it.

"I do not know what makes you think that, Monsieur. I do not think it can be true. I am very like my father, Mr. Pleydell, in appearance; and after a long separation, my mother and her friends knew me by my laugh, and my hands, and my hair, which are exactly like his. I do not think there is any likeness between you and me."

She was desperately frightened. Fear outweighed disgust, anger, every other emotion. This man her father! Better go back to Lola and Sefton.

Very deliberately, in his farcical English, M. Robert explained his position. Extreme pomp marked his manner; and after prefacing with apologies for touching on points not *convenable* for young Mees, he proceeded to reveal his connection with Madame her mozzer in some detail. When in Paris after her marriage, when M. Plédelle so neglec' his wive, he, M. Robert, had made her aguaintance, and had establish a great friendship. When she tole him that there would be an infant, he was sure of the paternity. Madame did not question it. But mose unfortunate, M. Plédelle did then remove his *domicile* from Paris.

He saw Madame some years later. She was then too mosh inebriate. There was a dispute at a café, of one gentiman with anozzer for that he take away his mistress. He, Robert, separate them. And then he reconise Madame, and his leedle daughter. But ze ozzer gentiman he have all ze rights; none could intrude. But when her friend come, and talk for the Hôtel Bienfait and assk for *facilités,* and mention Madame Plédelle and her daughter, he did know that it was once more ziss lady. He haff assk Mr. Sefton for all informations; Mr. Sefton say, yess: Madame Plédelle tell im ze yongue mees is daughter of ze Frenchman."

"And so you gave them their *'facilités,'* whatever those were," flung out Maisie, standing stern and still before him.

"Yess. I give," replied the unabashed Robert.

"I am not your daughter, and Mr. Sefton knows it," asserted Maisie, struggling for calm. "He has told me all about my father. I should be glad if you will be so good as to let me go back to the Hôtel."

Then followed a distressing scene. M. Robert laughed, expostulated, scolded, and finally wept. He insisted on embracing her. He appealed to the Father Eternal. He was alternatively terrifying and ridiculous. Maisie was distracted at the absurd position in which she found herself. The ludicrous emotion woven round this fantastic tale of sordid vice helped to make it seem less tragic. The comic side, with M. Robert drying his tears, and imploring a strange young woman to be his daughter and to lofe him, and holding out the bribe of the eligible *parti* he had already found, to whom Maisie would be wed with all suitable ceremony, so that she need not wark, nor tropple her reluctant relations, nor make the aguaintance of that *espèce de voyou,* Plédelle, kept her on the verge of hysterical laughter. At long last she escaped, M. Robert imploring, protesting, and upbraiding

to the end, and assuring her that all was not yet feenish between them. It was this last that terrified Maisie most.

Back at the Hôtel Bienfait, she telephoned to the Embassy, and said she would be ready to start the next day; and would be glad if someone from the Embassy would escort her to the terminus and see her off. A nervous dread had hold of her, that Robert might have her kidnapped. When she had arranged things with the Embassy, she got ready for dinner, hating to be scrutinized by the two cynical pairs of eyes, but too proud to seem to have been affected by M. Robert's revelations.

She would not wait to be questioned.

"M. Robert told me a most impossible story," she remarked, coldly, to Lola. "I think he must be not quite sane. He is very persistent, and obstinate; and I do not choose to go on eternally discussing the question . . . of my parentage. It is bad enough as it is. He tells me Mr. Sefton gave him to understand that my mother said it was true that this man was my father. You both know very well that that is not the case . . . I am not going to expose myself to any more of this sort of thing; I have borne more than enough of it. So I have arranged to leave to-morrow. Someone from the Embassy will see me off."

No remark of any sort followed this announcement. The plates were changed, the dinner went on, no further word was spoken. Maisie bolted as soon as she could, and sobbed herself to sleep on the little white bed.

Next day she presented herself in the side suite to bid Lola good-bye. Sefton was there.

"Are you off?" said Lola, lightly. "Good-bye. Good luck."

There was no handshake or other demonstration.

"Good-bye," said Maisie. "Thank you for offering to

let me stay. I hope you will find that I have left everything in good order."

"Thanks."

Maisie turned to Sefton.

"I am coming to see you off," he said.

Lola half rose; then sat down again.

No word was spoken as Sefton helped Maisie into the car sent by the Embassy. He took his seat beside her, and in utter silence they drove through the gay streets. Near the terminus, he drew a pocket-book from his pocket, wrote something, and folded it across and across.

"If you are in any serious trouble, and all else fails," he said, leaning over her and putting the hand with the note in it, on her knee, "this woman will help you, for my sake."

The emotion that prompted the action was one of those that Rips had distrusted so strongly and that made her say of him, "You never knew what silly thing Seffy would do, for all he was so clever." It was an action that he regretted to the last day of his life, and that he began to regret, and to curse himself for, the moment Maisie was out of sight.

Maisie took the note with a trembling hand, and raised tear-laden eyes for a moment to his. He clasped her close, and kissed her in the old tender fashion that had first won her.

"Sweetheart," he whispered. "All good go with you. Don't trust that sweep, your father."

He handed her over to the Embassy representative, she holding on to his hand at the last with a convulsive clutch. Then he lifted his hat and was gone.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT AUNT ELLEN DID

BLINDED with tears, aching with shame that this man should have power to move her still, Maisie stumbled along beside the polite Embassy gentleman, who chatted complacently and unintermittently, and behaved as if he had not seen the painful parting. It had, nevertheless, startled him a good deal, knowing something of the case, and had made him come to the conclusion that it was "a rum go." The parting was also seen by another traveller, a tall man whose oddly blue eyes looked out of a very dark face, and who moved respectfully aside to let Maisie pass. He saw the blurred eyes and the look of overwhelming unhappiness; but when searching for an opportunity, later on, of rendering some service, found these had passed away and were exchanged for a scarlet flush of interest and excitement at the sight of some aeroplanes manœuvring haughtily among the clouds. The face, sad or lit up with interest, lodged itself for good or ill irrevocably in his mind.

The respectable, if somewhat grubby comfort of the Family Hotel in Bloomsbury chosen by Mrs. Chetwynde was restful though not exactly inspiring; and there Maisie at last felt safe. A hot bath, a good dinner, and a long sleep restored her to something like serenity. Of Sefton she would not let herself think.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Chetwynde called. At the sight of her dear kind face Maisie broke down and cried stormily.

Soothed, and petted, and consoled, she was able to tell her aunt something of the troubles she had passed through. Something; but not all, for the dear lady's innocence interposed an impenetrable barrier between her and any real understanding of the infamies the girl had been entangled in. Maisie gave it up at an early period.

Mrs. Chetwynde was much excited at finding that Maisie knew where her father was. This was what the poor soul had longed to know, for years. Far from hastening to find employment for her niece, she urged her to establish communication with the long-lost brother before anything else was done. This was not at all what Maisie had intended; but she did not know how to resist her aunt's entreaties.

Stories of Bob and Eileen and Chenevix, Aunt Ellen's three children, beguiled the afternoon. Maisie longed to see her cousins, and built castles in the air touching the melting of the old Judge's heart and the installation of the new niece as a member of the family. Nothing that Aunt Ellen said was at all calculated to encourage this play of fancy; but Maisie's habit was incurable. Aunt Ellen herself, had she known what her niece was thinking of, would have been most uneasy.

"When shall I hear?" asked Aunt Ellen, as she rose to go.

"If I go to a registry office to-morrow," calculated Maisie, "it is bound to be a few days before I hear of anything . . ."

"Yes, dear, of course. But I was not thinking about that. What I want to know is, when shall I hear about your father?"

Maisie hesitated.

"I don't want to go to him until I have found employment," she repeated, for the fourth time.

"But, my dear, you may not do that for some time; and I am most anxious to hear; so very anxious. It is such a

weary long time, and I used to be so fond of dear Dickie. It would not prevent your finding employment, to find your father first."

Maisie felt her resistance melt. This woolly, unworldly, muddle-headed creature had the bleating obstinacy of a sheep. Stronger folk than Maisie had been vanquished by it.

In turning over a collection of letters, notes, memoranda, and addresses, to search for her father's address, Maisie came across the screwed-up bit of paper that Sefton had given her in the car. A rush of emotion flooded her mind for a few moments.

She had put this bit of paper in her bag intent only on the parting; and then had forgotten it.

Unscrewing it and straightening it out, to her amazement she read the name and address of Mrs. Stutchberry.

What possible connection could Jim Sefton have with Mrs. Stutchberry?

It was too much of a puzzle for her to grapple with, but it kept coming back to her mind at intervals. After a few minutes' further search, she found the address of the Vaults, and set out in search of that delectable resort without having the least idea in her mind what kind of a place a "thieves' kitchen" was likely to be.

"Mauleverer Road? Yes, lydy. Furss to the left and second to the right and as straight-as-you-can-go-lydy. You'll find it round-the-corner-at-the-top."

Repeating these classic directions, Maisie made her way to the desired goal.

"The Vaults? The *Vaults,* lydy?" with incredulity. "You goin' to the Vaults? This wye, lydy, just round here on the left."

Maisie moved down the unsavoury alley, to a chorus of squeals and cries.

"She's going to the Vaults." "Go on and tell the Boss 'ere's a lydy for a mornin' call." "The Duchess of Bys-

water to see Mr. Bloody Boss." "Got yer visitin' cards, lydy? No admittance excep' by card." "A lydy for the Vaults." "Garn!" "God's truth."

Scrambling, rushing, jeering, the youthful population of Pansy Alley crowded to see Maisie's reception at the Vaults.

The frowsy entrance daunted her a little, but she groped her way down it. A noise of sluicing and sweeping sounded near.

"Is there anyone here?" she called in her fresh voice.

The sluicing stopped suddenly.

She stepped aside and found the entrance to the kitchen. The Boss, listening and pausing in his task of cleaning up, saw her standing in the doorway with a slight hesitation and a smile.

At first he thought she was a missionary or a slum visitor or a health authority; and was going to be as insolent as he could. But her friendly manner disarmed him.

"I am looking for a place called 'The Vaults.'" she said.

"This is the Vaults," answered the Boss, curtly.

"Are you in charge?" she asked.

"I am, Madam. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, please," said Maisie, coming into the room in the friendly, confiding way that all her disappointments had not robbed her of. "I want to know, very much, whether you can tell me how to find my father."

Without a word, the Boss threw down his mop, chivvied away the peeping crowd, swilled down his arms and dried himself; and ushered Maisie into the inner room, where he caught up his coat and put it on.

"Oh! I am so sorry to disturb you at your work," she said, politely.

The Boss put a chair for her, and sat down close to her at the table.

"That is all right, Madam. It is of no importance. Touching this father of yours; can you tell me who he might be?"

"Yes," answered Maisie. "His name is Pleydell. Richard Pleydell. A Mr. Sefton told me I would hear of him here."

The Boss felt as if he were listening to a fairy tale.

"Let's get this right," he interrupted. "You are the daughter of Richard Pleydell—pukka daughter?" Then, seeing she did not understand, "Bona fyde, your mother Pleydell's wife?"

Maisie turned scarlet, and nodded.

The Boss stared at her disconcertingly.

"How long is it since you have seen your father?"

"I do not think I have ever seen him at all; not since I was less than two years old."

The Boss whistled.

"And you say Sefton told you to look for him here?"

"Mr. Sefton told me I would get news of him here." After a pause, "Mr. Sefton was very unwilling that I should try to find him and asked me to promise not to."

"Good for Sefton. That's the best thing I have ever heard of his doing," with cutting contempt. He still whistled softly, and stared at the posy of violets at her breast lost in bewilderment.

No thought of resentment, or of fear, crossed Maisie's mind. She thought the Boss looked honest and trustworthy; he often impressed people like that. Her aunt she dimly guessed to be a fool; this man would be more helpful. And he guessed that she had no suspicion of his real character; and his heart, or conscience, smote him.

"I suppose it would be impudent of me to ask what your circumstances are?" he queried, at last, rousing himself from his astonished reflections. His eyes wan-

dered over her well-cut costume, good gloves, and dainty shoes. The scarlet tide stained her face afresh.

"My circumstances are very poor, I have at this moment about £70; I could get some money if I chose, but I will not. I want to earn my living. If I could be quite independent, and if it were not so horrible to be young and alone, and so many dreadful people to be met, I would not have thought of going to my father . . . I don't think I would have. But once I had talked of it, my aunt was most anxious I should find him. I could not refuse the very first thing she asked me. She is his sister, and was very, very fond of him."

Dick the Toff, with these fascinating female relatives, a pretty and confiding daughter and an affectionate sister, was showing up in a new light indeed!

"Why did not your aunt come with you?"

"Her husband will not forgive my father for the things he has done; he is a judge, and he will not even allow me to come to his house. So she could not, you see."

The Toff's brother-in-law a judge! Well, well. And this confiding young woman talking to him, the Boss, as if he were a father confessor; Lord, what a world!

He flung his head back and shouted with laughter.

It was a hearty laugh, and showed a lot of sound teeth; Maisie found herself joining in. She had a confused idea that he was an odd associate for her, but she liked him.

"See here, Miss Pleydell," said the Boss, suddenly quite grave again; "Sefton told you right, when he said keep clear of your father. He is reckoned bad, even by bad 'uns. He is no fit father for you. If you like to give up the idea, the matter will be as secret as the grave with me—never pass my lips. What do you say?"

Maisie wavered. It was the thought of mild Aunt Ellen, and her reproachful eyes, that decided.

"I should not like to tell my aunt, who has been very

kind to me, that I was too great a coward to face my father. No matter what he has done, she still feels he is her brother."

"Is that your last word?"

"I think so; yes. I could not disappoint her so. And," hesitating, "it might be a chance for him to . . . to . . . to change his ways, you know."

"Don't let yourself think that sort of foolishness," said the Boss, almost rudely.

"What is he doing now?" asked Maisie, with an attempt at dignity.

"I don't know that I could tell you what he is doing, except that it is bound to be something crooked," said the Boss, with a grin that showed his strong white teeth again. "Any way, he is living in fairly respectable quarters; there is a decent woman there . . ." mused the Boss. "Young lady, will you trust me far enough to let me speak to your father before you see him, and see that he makes decent arrangements for receiving you? I won't waste time."

Maisie gave him her address and was escorted to the *débouchure* of the Alley by the Boss and an intensely interested crowd, who drew a deep breath of excitement when this completely top-hole and sanguinarily handsome young woman extended her hand to the Boss and shook his in friendly greeting. The Boss's bow, and his farewell remarks, roused the neighbourhood to a frenzy of respectful admiration.

"Ain't 'e a —— corf-drop just!"

"Ah! A —— 'ard-necked ole ——, 'e is."

" 'E's up to some blarsted deep ole gyme *this* time, what?"

"Ain't 'e got a neck on 'im! Oo's your lydy-friend, ole sport? Send us cards for the weddin'."

"Don't 'e know 'ow many beans make five, not arf, the Boss don't! 'You can 'ave our big double-bed, sec-

ond-hand, 'arf-price, now Ma's dead, if you apply hearly and pay in advance, we're givin' up Peckham and goin' to France' . . ."

The Boss gave one scowl, and a threatening and truculent pause. Peace fell on Pansy Alley in less time than it takes to write it.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAISIE'S FATHER

THE upshot of the Boss's negotiations was, that the unsatisfactory page-boy of the Bloomsbury Family Hotel announced two days later, at Maisie's bedroom door, that a gentleman was in the drawing-room to see Miss Pleydell. Filled with excitement Maisie ran downstairs, expecting to see the Boss.

In the drawing-room, with his back to the fire, stood a trim, clean-limbed man, extremely well groomed. His hair was a discreet grey, thick and inclined to be curly, his eyes pale blue, his mouth, bad-tempered but well-shaped, his hands and feet remarkable both as to shape and size for their beauty. He held his hat, stick, and gloves, and his manner was most pleasantly deferential. Maisie knew at once that this must be her father, and for a moment or two was so wrapped in a wave of shyness that she lost self-possession.

"May I introduce myself," said the stranger, in a very well-bred voice. "I am Richard Pleydell, known mostly as Peyton. A man I know of gave me your address, and says you believe that there is some family connection between us."

Maisie's dismay at this cool and distant greeting, with its business-like directness, was not much greater than that of the man at noting her age and appearance. He had said to the Boss, of Maisie:

"Flapper stage, I presume?" and had been annoyed and incredulous when that candid person replied, "Not at all; grown-up woman, and very well developed." What

kind of a fraud was this going to turn out, he was wondering, when he caught sight of Maisie's hands, as she fingered her locket-chain in momentary embarrassment.

He glanced furtively at his own supple fingers. Then he looked at Maisie's hair. The Pleydell hair was very recognizable.

Maisie shyly invited him to sit down; and the grace and ease with which he disposed of his limbs was duplicated in the opposite chair.

He turned to her in a quiet conversational way, as if inviting her to state her case. She leant forward, the pucker in her girlish brow reproducing softly the harsher lines of his own frown.

"I am the daughter—the only child"—began Maisie, "of Richard Pleydell of Pleydell's Covert, Buckinghamshire, and Meta Pleydell who was a Miss Brown of Cheltenham and went on the stage under the name of Meta Rippingsley."

She hesitated a little, and he said nothing, watching her intently.

"I was born at Camberley, and am twenty years of age. My mother died five weeks ago, in Paris. A Mr. Sefton gave me your . . . an address where he thought I might hear of you."

"Do you know anything of the past history of your father and mother?" asked Pleydell, judicially.

Maisie looked, and felt, embarrassed.

"Yes," she faltered; "at least, I don't really *know*, but I have been *told* a great deal."

"Do you know that the only child of that marriage died as a baby at Camberley?"

He snapped this at her with cold ferocity.

"That was a very painful part of the story," explained Maisie, "because you see I never died at all. I gathered from my mother that she thought it was the only way she could punish you for what you did to her—because

she thought you were fond of m—of your daughter—and would be hurt by her death."

"There was a tombstone put up to her . . ." Pleydell spoke slowly and tentatively.

"No there wasn't," cried Maisie, suddenly seeing the farcical side. "She never put one up. She sp——"

"She what?" asked Pleydell, grimly.

Maisie was silent.

"What did she do?" His cold eyes fixed hers, but there was the suggestion of a smile round his mouth. He was beginning to see the game Rips had played, and the comic side struck him too.

"She had a beano with the money," cried Maisie, forgetting to choose her words.

For a moment father and daughter gazed at each other fascinated; then simultaneously burst into laughter. The same infectious note rang in the voice of each.

Pleydell paused in his laugh to listen to his daughter's. That she was undoubtedly a Pleydell he could see; that she was remarkably attractive and would be a very creditable possession, he saw also.

"Where were you disposed of?" he asked presently. "Your mother and I lived together again, for a short time, after your supposed death. Where were you?"

"I was first at a place near London, I believe," said Maisie. "A sort of lodging-house where theatrical people came. My mother took me away and we went to France and Switzerland."

"You certainly look too old to be that fellow Stokes's daughter," mused Pleydell, looking her up and down and noting the scarlet that flamed in her cheeks at his plain speaking. "When I heard of you, I thought you must be a daughter of his. But that would make you only fifteen or sixteen; you look more than that."

"I remember Mr. Stokes," said Maisie, primly, "and he certainly wasn't my father. He never even pretended

to be. I am afraid," wanly, "that you cannot get rid of the responsibility—but you need not bother about me if you do not like."

She rose, haughtily, and held her chin up in a pretty way she had. He rose also, and put an arm round her shoulders.

"I do not think I want to repudiate the responsibility," he said, lightly and pleasantly. "I find myself the author of a very creditable performance which may, perhaps, be set against some of my less creditable ones. Give me a kiss, my little daughter, and let us see how we get on together. Who are you staying here with?"

Maisie kissed her attractive new parent and wished his eyes were not of such a pale cold hue. There is a kind of blue that is always criminal. In contemplating them, the feeling that he was an injured victim faded to vanishing point. She then told him how she stood, with certain reservations; and imparted to him Aunt Ellen's yearning for a reconciliation.

Pleydell laughed heartily—and cold-heartedly—at this, and asked Maisie if she had ever seen the little bounder that her Aunt Ellen had married.

"He is like a nutmeg grater," said Pleydell, lightly. "Makes you feel sore even to think of him. I have never known anyone so deliberately and blastingly rude as the little brute can be, not only if he dislikes you, but if you contradict him the least bit in the world. He hates anyone who disagrees with him; and that is mostly everybody."

"Won't you see Aunt Ellen?" asked Maisie, diffidently.

"Oh, I don't mind seeing her," he yawned. "Fix it up any way you like; only don't let her carry on as if she thought I was the repentant prodigal. Because I am not. Don't you get that idea into *your* head!"

Maisie shrank a little.

"Suppose we talk business," continued Pleydell. "How

much money have you, for instance; and what are you thinking of doing?"

"I have about £70," answered Maisie; "and I have heard of a position in a hotel—I am accustomed to hotel work . . ."

"Hotel? Do you mean as a chambermaid?"

"No, father, certainly not." Maisie was thoroughly annoyed. "I should never dream of such a thing; you must know that! As hotel clerk, to do the office and secretarial work. I have done that a good deal."

"One of those girls that everyone spoons, and that get hunted down like rabbits!" ejaculated Pleydell. "Certainly not. Not with my consent. Besides, why should you? If you have £70, you have enough pocket money to last you a while; and I see you have decent clothes."

"I have plenty of good clothes," said Maisie.

"Well then, why not come to me? It is a highly respectable place"—his eyes twinkled—"and Mrs. Fenton would look after you. She would love to have another young lady to do for; she has been maid to lots of decent people, and I know she has a couple of top rooms to let. I will see what can be managed. Are you all right here for the present?"

He dragged himself lazily to his feet and kissed her parent-fashion. Maisie had a momentarily entangled feeling; she could see dimly that in this man's hands she would have very little say in her own affairs.

"Bye-bye, my girl," he said, with the most fascinating smile. "You shall hear from me soon. Give my chin-chin to the aunt."

He waved a graceful hand and got himself out of the room, leaving his daughter a prey to depression and anxiety as great as any she had yet endured.

One thing struck her, however. He had spoken of her money as pocket money for her. He was evidently in fairly prosperous circumstances. She determined to find

out what his means were, before telling him of the Hôtel Bienfait and his claim in that concern. As for the blood-money business, she would hold her tongue entirely. The thought of those cold blue eyes glaring in concentrated ferocity on Jim Sefton made her blood run chill.

Maisie wrote to her aunt, describing her father, and asking how she should arrange a meeting between them. Aunt Ellen answered with fervour, but said that Chenevix was ill and she must postpone her trip for a while. The expedition to town to see Maisie, it must be stated, was disguised as a visit to the dentist.

So without other advice than that to be obtained from the Boss, Maisie had to make up her mind about her new life. She dispatched a letter to the Boss, and kept an appointment to meet him at Jack Straw's Castle on Hampstead Heath. Wandering among the romantic surroundings in which London's youth disports itself at week-ends and on Bank Holidays, Maisie poured her tale into an interested ear and received some sound advice in return. Had she but known her new friend to be her father's associate in a peculiarly low partnership, she would have been less unreserved.

The Boss advised her well, however. He told her to be careful how she talked of Sefton to her father, and not to give anybody away to anyone else. "Keep secrets," was his caution. "You keep from making enemies, and besides, you never know when they may be useful." Nor would it be well to tell Pleydell of his claim in the Hôtel Bienfait. "Keep that for yourself," advised the Boss. "They would always sooner give you a good lump down if ever you need it, than have you dragging him in." On thinking it over afterwards, Maisie felt that if he had not actually suggested to her that she should rob her father and blackmail her mother's partners, he had at least sailed very near the wind. She blushed for him and herself.

Above all, the Boss warned her, if she went to live with her father, to beware of trusting anyone else in the house. "Keep clear of them all," he said. "Whether it's that silly old ass, who is an M.P., or whether it's the landlord and his wife. Don't trust anyone or get intimate with anyone. And promise"—he stopped and stood in front of her—"promise, that if you are in a hole, or feel afraid, or don't know what to do, to let me know. Every Friday night I shall walk past the house. Drop me a line to say which is your window; and have a towel hanging out if you are all right. Of course, in any crisis, if you can write, well and good. But post the letters yourself. You can be quite sure that any letters you send and any you get will be opened. And if I miss the towel I shall reckon there is something wrong."

By this time, Maisie was getting to fancy herself in the rôle of a heroine of melodrama. A sort of fearful curiosity as to what would or could happen next was carrying her along, coupled with a morbid interest in her own possible adventures. If her father's lodging was so respectable, she would be safe, she argued; but at the worst there could not be the same kind of shame that had hung like a cloud over her mother; and there was no such element as had been supplied by the intrusion of Sefton. She was almost persuaded that for her, the normal and respectable was unobtainable. The two situations she had made sure of had one after the other slipped away; the question of "references" was harassing in the extreme. Aunt Ellen was delirious with joy and an almost girlish excitement, at the prospect of the reunion of father and daughter, and the further prospect of being able to see them both together at no distant period. She infected Maisie with some of her excitement; but was hopeless as a counsellor, or as an aid to securing a satisfactory paid position. Maisie had an unwholesome feeling that she would like to know how her father lived and

what was likely to befall in his company. She was in the first stages of that demoralization which begins with a longing for excitement and adventures.

The Paris days already seemed far away, and there was little in the stagnant atmosphere of the Family Hotel to make Maisie fall in love with respectability. The limp young women and censorious matrons, the pursy men and pimply youths, represented a section of humanity hitherto unknown. But for one family, Maisie would have given place in her breast to limitless scorn. There was a plain young woman, with spectacles, of the genus prig, who belonged to a loud-mouthed man, with glasses, of the genus bounder. They jointly possessed two precocious children also provided with spectacles; and an uncouth baby who fed, slept, and was clothed according to some rigid rule of hygiene. The tender devotion of the loud-mouthed man to the plain young woman, her sweet-tempered concern for all his fads and fancies and wishes, and the perfectly charming rapture that seized on the solemn little spectacled daughter at the sight of her "Daddee," glowed in the dull setting like a rich jewel, and penetrated the rather self-centred mind of the harassed Maisie.

"I am pretty," thought she, with unusual penetration, "and de Marinde, and Sefton, and poor young Torrance used to look at me as if they could eat me. But this woman is quite ugly; and yet he looks at her as if she were the most beautiful thing in the world, and those dreadful children as if they were really wonders. It is lovely to be fond of one another like that, and only to think of being good and kind, not clever and rich. I wish I belonged to a nice family of boys and girls with a father and mother that we could respect and love."

This hopeless aspiration beset her again and again as she watched the unlovely pair with their unlovely offspring spreading love and good-will and gentleness around

them. No one in the Hotel was uninfluenced by the domestic beauty of these unromantic lives. The plain young woman never asked Maisie any questions, or made attempts to obtain confidences; but, noting that she was alone, she made frequent simple manœuvres to join her in their little family group, to keep a place for her beside them, to tell her some bit of interesting news (culled from the instructive press which they patronized), or to ask her for enlightenment on the habits of foreigners, in which it was understood she was an adept.

On the eve of leaving for No. 29, Maisie thanked her, and for the first time gave her an idea that the future contained anxieties for her.

"I almost think it would have been wiser if I had held on until I got work," she faltered. "But it is so difficult without references, and I know no one here but my father and aunt, and they will not help me to get paid work."

"Your duty is with your father, if he really wants you," said Mrs. Simpson; "but if you ever want to do something different, will you write to us? William is so good in doing those sort of things for people, and with his business connections, he might quite easily find you something. You will try to get on with your father, won't you? And be sure and write to us if things go wrong. Good-bye; oh, *please* don't thank us; we were so happy to be able to make you a little less lonely. May I give you a kiss?"

Warmed and comforted in soul by the sheer goodness of this stranger, Maisie set out on her new venture, determining to be worthy of Mrs. Simpson's goodness, to do her best for her father, and to keep a straight course for what was right and true.

Mrs. Fenton received Maisie in a style that almost made her forget the Boss's stern warnings. When the good woman saw the high-bred, rather shy-looking young

lady, of the brand to which she was accustomed, stepping out of the cab at the door of the house that for years had admitted none but men lodgers, she could have cried for sheer joy. Nothing was too good for such a very ladylike young lady—a lady to the very tips of her boots, Mrs. Fenton said, admiringly, whatever her mother might have been. And the good soul registered a vow that she would protect this pretty young creature from the evil designs of "them men" at all and any costs.

For the present, her protection took the form of unlimited petting. Pleydell had added to his accommodation by renting the explorer's two rooms on a sub-lease; and used them as bedrooms for himself and his daughter. Mrs. Fenton made the room as cosy as possible for Maisie, so that she could, if she desired, use it as a sitting-room. She kept flowers blooming in it, plied "My young lady," as she at once began to call her, with unlimited trays of tea and toast, and tenderly undertook complete charge of the pretty French costumes and underwear that filled Maisie's manifold trunks.

"Begin as you mean to go on," was Pleydell's motto with women. He received Maisie when she arrived, sent her up to her room to "make herself at home," and told her that he would expect her down to lunch. At lunch, after a carelessly affectionate welcome to his den, he sat himself at the head of the table and proceeded to act as host, in a casual and intermittent manner, while he pored over the columns of a sporting paper. When the coffee came, he suddenly wheeled round from the table to the fire, threw away the paper, and began putting Maisie through a sort of cross-examination.

In spite of his astuteness, she baffled him. He did not hear about the fashion of her leaving Mrs. Stutchberry's or the Hôtel de la Côte; he did not hear her childish memories; he did not hear of young Torrance nor of his wife's partnership in the Hôtel Bienfait. And he only

heard the very slightest possible amount about Jim Sefton. He heard nothing about M. Robert; nor of the nature of the Bienfait *clientèle*. Not only did he hear nothing of all this, but he did not suspect that there was anything of all this to hear; and he formed a low opinion of the intelligence and powers of observation of his daughter.

"She is as stupid as an old boot," he said to himself. "Fancy living with Meta and her associates and seeing and hearing nothing wrong. She can have neither eyes nor wits. What a daughter for us to breed!"

On the subject of her interviews with the Boss he pressed her hard. How had he received her; what had she said; what did the Boss tell her?

"I really couldn't tell you," she replied several times, in a quietly uninterested voice. "He was extremely civil and kind, and said he would let you know about my calling if I would give him my address. So he did, did he not?"

"He didn't get you to say anything about yourself?" at last queried Pleydell, point-blank.

"About myself? Oh, yes, he did; or at least, I did."

"What did you say?" sharply.

"Just what there was to say—that I had come from Paris, and had been given his address as a place where I would be likely to find news of you; and that I was quite alone here and was looking for work."

Pleydell gave up the unequal contest. His daughter was a match for him. He set her down as a stupid goose, and thought no more about her association with the Boss.

He was a pleasant companion, however, by fits and starts. Maisie passed a good deal of her time by helping Mrs. Fenton with the dusting and tidying, and the marketing and mending. But Pleydell, who was immensely pleased with his new toy, kept her constantly at his disposal. He took her to concerts and theatres, and to

picture galleries and collections and historic haunts. They dived together into books of reference and solved acrostics in the weekly papers and put into limerick and missing word competitions; and Pleydell found himself actually enjoying it.

"If I don't look out I really shall be reformed!" he mused, sardonically.

He could laugh like a school boy over the most idiotic incidents and jokes; and get into sudden shocking rages that frightened Maisie disproportionately. His memory was marvellous and no little incident escaped it. When in a good mood Maisie enjoyed his company greatly; but on bad days, his moodiness and irritability depressed her and kept her in constant fear of an outbreak of rage.

Pleydell was proud of his pretty daughter and the notice she attracted. He liked to see men's eyes fixed on the bright animated face; and he was, also, in his own way, fond of her now as he had been when she was a baby. He often wondered why.

Several of the men he had got to know at his club—men who belonged to new movements, or who were travellers and oversea adventurers, ready to be friendly with interesting people without inquiring into their antecedents—came to dine and spend evenings at No. 29, and were wonderfully attracted by Maisie. It was this, eventually, that began to give her father concern and set him thinking.

He had written her down for a simpleton, in his mind; and beyond doubt she was girlish in many ways in her outlook. But in conversation with these men of a wider world she was able to play her part without figuring as a goose. Shrewd remarks, a knowledge of many matters hidden from the ordinary "young lady" and the faculty of discussing them with good sense and without coarseness; besides a remarkable capacity for observation, gave Pleydell cause to wonder whether he had been

wise to give in to a gust of sentimentality and land himself with this unknown quantity as a permanent companion.

"I have one devastating weakness," confessed Maisie to a tanned and grizzled globe-trotter who had summed up both father and daughter and thought it the most pathetic *ménage* he had ever come across. "I am no judge of character. I absolutely lack the sense of discrimination in regard to people. The worst people in the world I am liable to think delightful."

"Some are," remarked the old hunter. "But where have you met such?"

"That is a long story," replied Maisie. "Only I have; and did not know it until too late."

The grizzled traveller drew his own conclusions, with a swift mental reference to the father. But Pleydell listened uneasily. Had the girl bluffed him? He hated of all things to be made a fool of. A sort of hostility to Maisie set in unconsciously, from that day. Like her mother, he wondered how much she knew, or what she would do if she ever knew all.

On Fridays Maisie hung a towel out of her window for the Boss to see. It could not be seen from the street in front, only from the street that ran at right angles a few doors below. She wrote, posting the letter herself, to tell him she was comfortable and that Mrs. Fenton was as good as a mother and nurse in one; and that she hoped she would see him some day. But he did not suggest that she should meet him again nor did she get any answer to her letter.

Pleydell was, of course, living at No. 29 under the alias of Peyton, and it was some time before Maisie got used to her new name. She recognized the good sense of cutting all connection with convict associations, but rather wondered at the ease with which her father had shaken off his fellow-sinners. Had she known more of

her friend the Boss, and the terror that he and the Toff together inspired she would have understood better.

She went once or twice to see Mrs. Simpson and the uncouth children, and was surprised at the amount of pleasure she derived from this simple diversion. Once they all went together to the Zoo, and that was an unforgettable day. Maisie felt like a child again, and when she said good-bye, kissed them all, including the unattractive Mr. Simpson, to the delight of the whole party. And one day when Pleydell was out, they all came to tea with her and ate Mrs. Fenton's wonderful soda cakes with the heartiest of appetites, in the temporary suspension of the hygienic rules.

Aunt Ellen also came to No. 29 one deliriously joyful day, and spent much of it dissolved in tears of happiness. Pleydell was lightly cynical, and by no means effusive; but satisfied her not exorbitant demands for affection. The Judge, it appeared, did not believe in the aching tooth, in which he showed some penetration; but it had offended Aunt Ellen deeply. In the course of her life with the "nutmeg grater" she had grown inured to hearing herself accused of lies when she told the truth. To be accused of lies on the only occasion that she could recall having wilfully told one, gave her an acute sense of injury. The injustice of it almost goaded her into a more resolute attitude.

"I really will not put up with any more of it," she repeated over and over again, to the mirth-shaken Maisie.

Pleydell gave her some perfectly divine sherry, and made her stay to dinner, at which she partook of equally divine hock and port. A district messenger was dispatched to the neighbourhood of the dentist's atelier, thence to send a telegram saying she had missed the train.

"And if he does not accept that," said Aunt Ellen, as

one who comes to a final decision, "I shall simply tell him what he calls a lie."

No one asked her to elucidate this curious implication.

The dinner was a very happy function; Pleydell was at his best, and Maisie sparkled with her old charm, making her father open his eyes. They went together to see Aunt Ellen off and took a tender farewell of her at Victoria. Then father and daughter walked back together.

As they reached the door of No. 29, and Pleydell paused to push the gate back for Maisie to enter, Sergeant Ferryman came round the corner in his rubber-soled shoes. He passed behind Pleydell, almost brushing against him; and looked quickly over his shoulder as he passed, into the other man's face.

"Ah!" said Sergeant Ferryman, to himself. And then again, as he walked swiftly and silently on:

"Ah! Lives there, now."

CHAPTER XIX

THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

"WHAT you want is a seccatry, my lord," said the discreet Fenton, after Lord Johnny had damned and blasted for five minutes on end over a missing item from one of his dockets.

Lord Johnny was inclined to think so too, but not inclined to own it. He snorted at Fenton; and pushed his chair violently away from the desk, with as much noise as a squadron of cavalry charging. It was most extraordinary where that plan had got to. It was there when he had last looked; though when that was, he was blest if he could say. A most important plan. It would never do for it to get left lying about. Those photographic copies, too. That was a rum thing. A damn rum thing. You could see they were copies at once. How had the mistake been made? A lot of odd things had happened lately. It might be as well to tell Fenton. On the other hand, Fenton might be annoyed, might think he was not trusted. It was so easy to give some impression like that. On the whole, perhaps he had better try the secretary first. A secretary might spot it just at once; people like that were used to overhauling papers and getting things straight.

"You spoke of a secretary, Fenton," bawled Lord Johnny, next day.

"A seccatry? Yes, my lord."

"Do you know of one; a decent one that one could trust?"

"Well, my lord, I can't say that I do. It is hardly

in my line of business, so to speak. If it were a valet you were wanting, or a tailor, or a barber, now; but I am afraid, my lord, a seccatry is too high a flight for me."

All this with pleasant, indulgent deference.

"You wouldn't like to put in an advertisement, my lord?"

"An advertisement!" exploded Lord Johnny; "Good God, no. Fancy having to interview swarms of bounders and swindlers and begging-letter writers! You must be going soft, Fenton, to think of such a thing."

"I beg your pardon, my lord; yes, I know it is a very troublesome, unsatisfactory business. But somehow, my mind won't work into the idea. Perhaps if you will allow me to think it over, my lord . . ."

"Yes, just think it over. And I will speak to some of the fellows at the Club."

At the Club, a young man of promise was spoken of, and Lord Johnny inclined his ear to the tale and felt that it was not going to be such a difficult matter after all. The young man of promise was a connection of Admiral Jago's, and the Admiral vouched for his capacity and docility. When the Admiral had gone, however, Lord Johnny also missed his umbrella. He had taken special pains in rolling it tight that morning, and felt doubly annoyed. He had often noticed that Admiral Jago never had the same stick twice running.

"Perhaps your lordship did not bring it to-day," suggested the peacefully disposed porter; but he could not have made a more provocative remark.

"Didn't bring it?" shouted Lord Johnny. "Didn't . . . ? What do you suppose I rolled it for, if I did not bring it? Do you suppose I rolled it to put it to bed, or to hang it up as an ornament?"

These things being a mystery, and the porter being besides a man of peace, Lord Johnny's fulminations were received in silence. He got himself home, grumbling all

the way; and found the umbrella in the corner beside his mantelpiece. This did not in any way assuage the suspicions he had begun to harbour of Admiral Jago's probity; and he would not give the idea of engaging a connection of such a person as a secretary, one moment's consideration.

"Have you thought of a lady, my lord?"

Thus Fenton, tentatively.

"A lady! Have you gone stark, staring mad?"

"Well, my lord, lots of gentlemen, and noblemen, have them. Much less meddlesome, my lord, and much less obstinate; and they don't gamble, or drink, or speculate. Ladies make very good secretaries, my lord."

"Fenton, you sly dog, I believe you have a lady up your sleeve . . . up your sleeve, you know you have! Now don't say you haven't; you can't take me in, you know."

"No, my lord, I can't, and that's the truth. There *is* a young lady, that me and Mrs. Fenton is interested in. That young lady, my lord, that lodges upstairs and is related to the gentleman on the ground floor back. I know that a little money in her pocket would be very welcome, my lord; and she is used to seccataral work. A very hard life she has had, my lord, very hard, for a young thing like her."

"Poor thing, poor thing," sympathized Lord Johnny, mouthingly. "Is she . . . er . . . a lady, well-mannered and so on?"

"Oh, quite a lady, my lord," said the shocked Fenton. "A lady every hinch. Mrs. Fenton wouldn't make no mistake about a thing like that! Would you like to see her, my lord? Mrs. Fenton would bring her up to-morrow, if you liked. She's a very handsome young lady," as an afterthought.

The fellow on the ground floor was a particularly pleasant fellow, thought Lord Johnny, partly aloud; and

it was easy to see that he had gone through some rough times. It would be a jolly nice thing, yes it would, to help on people like that. Pyton—Pigton was his name, wasn't it? He had spoken of an annuity; of course that meant he had nothing to leave his daughter when he died, and was trying to save. Yes. Yes. Very proper. And what a damn pretty piece of goods she was . . .

Lord Johnny tumbled into the trap without a struggle.

Maisie had noticed that Fenton often lingered about the room after clearing away the lunch; and that sometimes her father would walk out before him, Fenton following. Pleydell would say, "Wait here till I come back, Maisie girl," or "Shall I find you here presently?" and Maisie had gleaned the notion that he wanted her to stay in the sitting-room. She had distinctly heard him going upstairs with Fenton. She had heard something else. One day she went up to her bedroom, and heard their voices in Lord Johnny's room. And one morning, when Lord Johnny had gone out early, she had come running downstairs and found them strolling out of the first-floor sitting-room, Fenton with a coat over his arm, and Pleydell with lazy hands in his pockets.

Neither took any notice of her, and she hurried away.

"Do my father and Lord Johnny know each other very intimately?" she asked Mrs. Fenton, as they went off shopping for the household.

"Well, Miss Maisie dear, the gentleman have call several times. Mr. Pleydell know Mr. Rookwood too, but he never much more than say good morning or good evening in the hall."

"My father was in Lord John's room just now, with your husband. Does Lord John go in and out of our rooms when we are not there?"

"I expect Mr. Fenton must have been showing Mr. Dick the horns Lord Johnny is so proud of. Some lovely

horns, he have there. His lordship is very proud of them. Don't you notice what the gentlemen does, my dearie. They has their own ways; it doesn't do to let them know you notice."

It was borne in on Maisie's understanding, by degrees, that both Lord Johnny's and Mr. Rookwood's rooms were frequently visited. It was a most disquieting knowledge. She and her father were on easy, chaffing terms; but for all that she was afraid of him, and would not discuss this with him, any more than she had discussed his past life, or his treatment of her mother. She brooded over it in silence.

"Well, Maisie, do you want a job?" asked Pleydell, lighting his cigar after lunch and walking up and down the room.

"What sort of a job, father?"

"Secretary—private secretary; to the noisy old johnny upstairs; he's an M.P., you know. It's quite an important billet, private secretary to an M.P."

"It sounds splendid," laughed Maisie, "but does the noisy old boy really want me for a private secretary?"

"He says he does," replied Pleydell, lightly. "Mrs. Fenton has been singing your praises, and he says it is just what he wants. Mrs. F. wants you to go with her and interview him."

It was all arranged so easily and quickly, Maisie had hardly time to turn round when she found herself installed as private secretary to the irresponsible Lord Johnny. She had to be on duty at 11 a. m., and take charge of correspondence, files and statements. She also had to shape and type the questions with which Lord Johnny bombarded members of the Government at all times and seasons on an infinite variety of points. She had, too, to read the papers, to cut out and paste in its place any allusion to Lord Johnny, and to seek diligently

for any fact bearing on questions he had asked, or providing matter for a fresh avalanche of insinuation.

"You'll get used to it, you'll get used to it," he shouted at her, treating her as if she were seated at a great distance instead of at his elbow. "It is all knack. Just knack. There is nothing in it. The Parliamentary habit can be picked up by any fool, bless you."

And Maisie thought it had.

It was understood that she was not to object to being on duty late at night if necessary; and that she would have frequently to attend at the House of Commons. This, and the salary—which was a generous one—delighted her. When she did go to the House, she was additionally delighted to find herself as useful as any of the tried and seasoned hands; and Lord Johnny told everyone, even the Speaker, what a splendid thing it was to have a nice clever girl for a secretary.

Maisie saw Mrs. Simpson, and told her how lucky she had been; and wrote to Aunt Ellen, telling her also. She was debating whether she should write to Mrs. Macleod or Mrs. Stutchberry, putting it off from day to day, when something aroused all her sleeping suspicions.

One day, at breakfast—Pleydell breakfasted at ten—her father talked deliberately of Lord Johnny.

"I suppose he still gets the usual crop of indiscreet confidences," he said, in his light way. "Has anything important come in since you were there?"

"I don't suppose he would like me to tell, if there had," answered Maisie.

"Oh, all the world knows about Lord Johnny's revelations," sneered Pleydell. "All sorts of people come to him with yarns. Much good it does anybody! Is he going to the House this afternoon?"

Maisie nodded. She was going too.

It was a Monday, and business in the House was slack. When Lord Johnny had got an answer to his question, he

found that the programme was not worth staying for. So he repaired to his Club, and Maisie came home. The big desk was in disorder. It was easy to see that things had been displaced.

Curiously, she did not think of her father; and she told him, gravely, about it when he came in to dinner.

"Are you going to suggest that it is Fenton?" he asked.

"Better not," coldly.

There was a hard menace in his tones and she felt chilled.

"I don't know or think anything about who did it," she answered, "but it has been meddled with. I know exactly how I left things."

"Better not say anything yet," advised Pleydell, in a more amiable tone. "You want to be awfully sure, before raising a scare like that. I'll ask Fenton if he was dusting or turning things out."

Fenton agreed, most deferentially, that he had thought it a good opportunity for a turn out; but had been interrupted in the middle.

The following Friday, Maisie again came home early, and entered the house as Mrs. Fenton was arguing with a Singer's Sewing-machine man at the door. Going straight up to Lord Johnny's sitting-room, she found her father sitting at the desk, with one of the carefully folded dockets in his hand.

Lord Johnny had, of course, made Maisie search the desk and the room for the plan he had mislaid; but it had not been forthcoming. He had impressed on her, with shouts and the most forcible ejaculations, how valuable it was, how much harm might be done by its falling into wrong hands, and how much money certain people would pay to secure such a document. He had postponed communication with Scotland Yard, in the incurable optimism that induced him to believe it must eventually turn up

somewhere; although Maisie had hesitatingly suggested that the police ought to be informed without loss of time. She did not press her suggestion, not feeling anxious to invite the police to any establishment where her father was. Lord Johnny procrastinated, having the best of good reasons for not wishing the police to know anything about it at all.

Seeing Pleydell sitting there, she knew at once what had happened and where the missing plan had gone.

"What are you doing, father?" she asked, loudly.

"I am looking for a copy of an agreement that I gave Lord Johnny last week," he answered readily, without a flicker of a feature to betray emotion. "Have you seen it by any chance? He said he would leave it on the desk for me."

"Agreement about what?" inquired Maisie.

"The dockyards and a man who has invented a gun," answered Pleydell, rising, and leaving the sheaf of folded papers lying. "A scandalous agreement; regular robbery. Never mind, I'll come up to-night and ask him about it. Put this straight. You need not tell him I rummaged about myself."

His charming smile irradiated his face, and he strolled lazily out.

Maisie sat down at the desk with her face on her arms. Now what was she to do!

Her father's sources of income were plain to her. Theft; blackmail; treason; it was a lucrative business. Maisie knew well by this time the very delicate nature of the information brought by trusting idiots to Lord Johnny, and his total unfitness for the trust. It was a daily marvel to her. But she had not dreamt of this.

She had wondered many times at her father's easy circumstances. When asked about his means, he would answer airily, "A fat annuity!" He never allowed any

discussion of his resources by Maisie; nor would he let her speak of his past life nor of her mother.

"Look here," he said one day, with his hard stare. "Let sleeping dogs lie; do you hear? Don't ask questions and no lies will be told you. The past is past. Leave it alone."

Now the past was rising up; the criminal past. He was still a criminal. And he had found a snug pitch—a retreat where crime was made absolutely easy.

It was quite plain to her that Fenton was in this job too. She wondered how much Mrs. Fenton knew. Her own position was frankly untenable, and she must throw up her work at once. It would be easy enough to get another billet now, with Lord Johnny as a reference. The difficult question was, ought she to tell? Nay, not ought; *could* she tell? She knew she ought; but could she send her father back to gaol? She was in the same dilemma—only worse—as she had been in the affair of young Torrance. Truly she was being punished for her weakness and silly, morbid curiosity.

She asked Mrs. Fenton to let her have her dinner in her bedroom; and locked the door to avoid explanations with her father. When Lord Johnny came in, she heard her father knock at his door and invite him downstairs for a drink and a hand at écarté. She did not believe in that dockyard agreement . . . but if she asked Lord Johnny about it and had to explain, it would be awkward.

She might just as well go to the police as do that.

The thought of the harm she might do by simply slipping away out of it herself and leaving her father to continue his unholy dealings, made her tremble. Her visits to the House of Commons—far more than Lord Johnny's windy fulminations—had given her an idea of the national and international intrigues in which at any moment the peace of Europe might be strangled. National secrets;

inventions; leakages; weaknesses; there was a market for all this—a greedy, ravenous market with generous prices and a rigid secrecy. She had learned all this from other secretaries and from the anxious business men whom she interviewed for her irresponsible chief.

Her duty was to go at once to Scotland Yard.

Could she do it? Hardly.

Could she tell Lord Johnny?

She smiled involuntarily, thinking of the noisy outbreak it would provoke.

What would he do? Rave and storm at Fenton, and go down and "have it out" with Pleydell, more than likely. And what would *they* do? A sudden chill struck at Maisie's heart. They were dangerous men to cross, or to encounter if they were at bay. What would they *not* do?

The grotesque affection of Aunt Ellen for her priceless rogue of a brother came across Maisie's mental vision. She would never understand, and would grieve bitterly. Maisie groaned and tossed sleeplessly, a prey to dreadful doubt. And she forgot that it was Friday night, and hung out no "All's Well" signal for the Boss.

At eight o'clock, Percy Street is very quiet. All the gentlemen lodgers, and the gentleman's gentlemen who lodge them, are absorbed in the business of dinner. Those who dine out will have clanged the little iron gates after them some twenty minutes before; those who dine at home will have come in at about the same time to change. Expectant taxis, district messengers and belated tradesmen's boys have moved off; the hush of the evening ritual broods over the gentlemanly precincts of this gentlemanly quarter.

At eight o'clock the police constable on the beat does not hover about Percy Street. He knows of "a better 'ole." There is an engaging little piece in Howard Street

—across the 'bus line—whose people dine at the unfashionable hour of seven. She is good for a plateful of something 'ot, for any of the officers on the beat, just about eight. It would be a mug's game, playing round Percy Street with her waiting . . .

The towel out of the back window of No. 29 had never attracted the notice of the Force. On Fridays only; it was too much of a stretch for the fancy, and the observation, of even Sergeant Ferryman, had he ever noticed it. Lots of people wash out a thing or two just at the week-end. Women and washing; there's always washing where there's women. That's what landladies hate so. "Only Mrs. Fenton seemed fair taken up with that young lady she have got; and there's no denying she is a fine handsome young lady and pleasant too."

The Boss strolling slowly but purposefully, with hands in the pockets of a thick reefer over-jacket and a dirty pipe between his teeth, wondered what was up and what was he to do. No towel. P'raps she'd forgot. Wouldn't do to take that for granted. The Toff was on to a real big thing, big enough to fix them up for life; no more risks. There was only one little bit of link wanting, and there was not really much danger, with that silly old Juggins. It had seemed fearfully risky at first, because of the other place they had had to get into; but the Boss himself had put that through with the help of the rat-eyed youth he had hidden up the chimney; it had gone off without a hitch. Now there was just this one slip of paper to lay hands on—all the rest had been wonderfully easy.

Had the Toff run up against his girl, by any chance? It had been closely debated, whether it was wise, or silly, to put her on to the secretaryship. It had not been for the sake of what she would tell, but because the old Juggins was soft about women. In the event—the dreadful event—of discovery, she was to plead for her father;

get him free from prosecution and get him off to the States; and they would send him his share if they pulled it off without him. Fenton reported that the rotten old fool was head over ears . . . talked of her, drivelled, over his grog, after she was in bed. She would be able to get anything she liked out of him. So far, she had not appeared to guess the state of mind she inspired.

The Boss wondered if anything had happened prematurely, and wended his way to the Scullery.

Dick the Toff came in after a while. He nodded to the Boss, and ordered a drink, chatting to one or two men that he knew. As he passed the Boss he stooped to pick something up.

"This yours?" he said, handing it to the Boss.

"Ah! yes, thanks. How's things?"

"Oh, from fair to middling," answered the Toff, and went out with a couple of men bound for the Palace, where a superlatively indecent "turn" was being vehemently defended by the Bishops in an effort to protect the Church from a charge of prudery.

The note the Toff had passed to the Boss made an appointment for another lair, where they presently foregathered.

"Anything up?" asked the Boss.

"The girl suspects something," answered the affectionate parent. "Found me at the desk; has not been down to dinner. May be nothing but megrims; but again, may be very serious."

They smoked in silence.

"Is she likely to inform?"

"Don't know what the devil she is 'likely' to do. Wish I did. I used to think she was simple; but I don't know that I do now." And after a pause: "If I had not thought her simple, I would not have gambled on her taking the secretaryship."

"What do you think of doing?"

There was a long silence. Then Pleydell turned, in the dim light, towards his confederate, taking the cigar deliberately out of his mouth, and speaking with a cold concentration of ferocity that made even the Boss's triple-plated unscrupulousness seem washy and sentimental.

"I wouldn't let God's Son stand between me and the fortune we can make out of this. Not God's Son—let alone my daughter. If she won't play up, let her look out for herself."

It is quite possible that in his settled policy of never allowing his mates to think there was any limit to his capacity for evil—except "narking"—Pleydell expressed more than he had the least intention of carrying out; but for all that he fairly scared the Boss.

"Have you done anything yet?" he asked hastily.

Pleydell shook his head.

"Shall wait and see to-morrow," he said. "Get your little rat out of the way. Give him some money and keep him off jobs of any kind."

The Boss returned to the Vaults and had evil dreams. Pleydell slept like an innocent child.

Maisie was at breakfast as usual, and her father watched her, when he could do so unobserved, over the top of his newspaper.

"What's the programme to-day?" he asked.

"The usual thing, I suppose," she answered, calmly.

It was too calm and too unresponsive. Pleydell knew then that there was trouble brewing.

All day he watched and schemed. All day she pondered and puzzled. It being Saturday, he made her go out with him; and they visited Hampton Court, and a variety hall. Late at night Lord Johnny rang for her. By that time she had made up her mind.

Having taken Lord Johnny's instructions, and made some notes for questions, she asked if she might speak to him for a moment. He installed her noisily in a chair by

the fire; and nearly fell out of his own into the fender when she said she wanted to give notice.

His noisy remonstrances would have been easily audible on the stairs and she winced uncomfortably.

"I am very sorry to give up my work, and very sorry to put you to inconvenience, Lord John; but I can't stay here any longer. I cannot stay where my father is. I must beg you to consider this a confidential statement; but it is most necessary that I should get away from him. It was very foolish of me to try such an experiment as living with him, after all these years that we have been strangers."

Having made this plain enough for his dense understanding to grasp, she went further.

"I want you, please, *please* not to let anyone know that I am leaving you. Please don't speak of it to Fenton or to anyone. Fenton would tell my father at once. He tells him everything."

Lord Johnny's amazement at the idea of Fenton's being indiscreet was too vast for expression.

"Will you please not mention it to *anyone*?" urged Maisie.

"Yes, yes; no, I mean. All right. Of course not. But this is amazing. And where are you going?"

Maisie did not answer.

"What are you going to do? Have you anywhere to go to, my dear child?"

The queer change in his voice surprised her.

"No; at least, I can go to an hotel. I know some people . . . Oh yes, I am all right. I will get another billet. You will give me a reference, won't you?"

"I should think so; I should think I would; rather." The sentimental mumble in his speech was becoming more marked, and Maisie looked at him with curiosity.

"You won't go off without letting me know?"

His mouthing was quite horrid.

"Oh no, certainly not," she replied, rising in distaste.

He took her hand and held it, patted it, held her arm, walked with her to the door and squeezed the arm, patted her shoulder, and made mouthing, mumbling, sentimental noises that made her cut her good-nights very short.

"What *beasts* men are; what *beasts!*" she repeated, frantically, in her bed, safely locked in and alone. "An old thing like that . . . older than my father!"

CHAPTER XX

THE STRANGE FRIEND AND THE STRANGER

ANTHONY ROOKWOOD was thirty-two, and had been in the Bank of London since he had left Rugby and Oxford. His father had been manager, and had been succeeded by a childless brother; and there was every probability that Anthony would succeed to the position in due time. He was everything that a trusted bank official should be; and several other very desirable things also. He had come into a substantial income at his father's death, and had travelled, during his leave, in many queer and pleasant places; he was a fine oar, a very fine whip, and knew a lot of nasty Japanese tricks of wrestling. He was a generous friend, a dutiful and deeply affectionate son and nephew to the two elderly men whose hopes were anchored in his future; and joined a catholic taste in literature to a hoard of hidden sentimentalities that few guessed at. No one had ever known him do a shady thing.

Rookwood disliked Pleydell with the instinctive aversion of the clean for the dirty. And because he disliked him and knew him to be crooked, he had taken good care to have few dealings with him. A man with eyes like that, said Rookwood's friend, Capt. Everard, who was an Assistant Commissioner of Police, could not help being a criminal. Or, perhaps, could not help showing he was a criminal. He would come to the gallows, with luck.

"Your luck would not be his luck," said Rookwood, laughing.

Fenton knew that Capt. Everard came from Scotland Yard, and the situation was somewhat awkward; but he and Pleydell hoped that, as he was a fairly new hand, he would not know about Pleydell, alias Peyton. The higher officials were notoriously careless of details such as those, leaving them to the lower ranks. Pleydell's whereabouts, having been spotted by the watchful Ferryman, had been reported; and Fenton had been sent for to Scotland Yard. The summons had given him what he described as a turn.

He was interviewed by a grey-headed, keen-eyed officer who told him that it was his duty to inform him that his lodger, Richard Peyton, had served a term of penal servitude under the name of Pleydell. He had earned substantial remission of his sentence by good behaviour, but had since his release consorted with criminals in a low resort kept by a man of suspicious character.

"Mr. Peyton," said Fenton, deferentially, "came to me because I was in service, and my father before me, with his father. I know the trouble he got into; but I could not but help him to recover himself."

"Do your other lodgers know?"

Fenton shook his head.

"In a house like mine, there is no carrying of tales from one set of lodgers to another. I expect my gentlemen to mind their own business. I am hardly ever off the premises, and nothing could go on in the house without my knowing. It is to my interest to have a decent and respectable house, with the class of gentlemen I get, and you may be sure I wouldn't have taken in this poor gentleman if he hadn't been likely to live quiet and sober and keep out of trouble. You can trust me, sir, I think, to look after the interests of my gentlemen. They are my own interests too."

This was good sense; and the official grunted, warned, and dismissed Fenton.

Pleydell did indeed live so quietly and respectably,

that the closest scrutiny could find little to cavil at. He was known to exchange greetings with the Boss at the Scullery, but he never revisited the Vaults nor was ever seen in questionable resorts. He neither drank, gambled, nor kept bad company. The Boss, too, had done one or two good turns to the police, in respect of stolen property in the hands of persons who did not patronize the Vaults; and he was not held in ill-favour by the tribe of Sergeant Ferryman.

Capt. Everard, quite truly, had never heard of Pleydell, alias Peyton; and Rookwood and he, therefore, only looked on him as a potential, not an actual criminal. They were agreed that intimacy with the man with the bad eyes was undesirable, and felt only a distant and impersonal interest in him.

It was therefore a shock, and a severe shock, when Rookwood heard Pleydell's pleasant voice addressing someone in terms of endearment and when that person answered with a lilting laugh that he felt sure he recognized. His heart thumped aggressively; and he spent considerable time and ingenuity on dodging for a sight of the owner of the laugh. When it turned out to be the girl he had first seen on the platform at the Paris terminus, in charge of an Embassy official and taking a tearful parting of the tall grey man whose face he had not seen, a feeling of great distaste settled on him.

If that pretty girl were Peyton's daughter of whom Mrs. Fenton spoke—daughter of that sweep whose eyes condemned him—she would probably be a young woman very badly brought up. Loose notions of conduct and propriety, faulty views on the moralities; flighty, flirtatious. The persistent way her laugh, and her fresh voice, and her saucy scraps of French songs, echoed in his mind and returned unbidden to his memory, did not enlighten him, being but a man, and a young man, and therefore foolish in such matters, as to the state of his feelings. He

did not know why a day in which he heard none of them seemed to be a grey, unproductive day; indeed, he did not know, and would have denied strenuously, that he took any interest, other than distasteful, in the Peyton household. He found himself wondering, with some indignant concern that he never traced to its source, who the man was she kissed at the Gare St. Lazare. He was not *young;* Rookwood wished he had seen his face . . .

And the next thing he knew was, that he had accepted an invitation to spend the evening with the father and daughter.

The dinner that followed, at Rookwood's expense, at the Ritz, was a revelation to Maisie. She felt about it as she had felt when she went to the Casino at Mont Roselle. All the things she had expected were the things that were not; and the things she enjoyed were the unexpected. The indescribable fatness—the jelly-wobbling, she described it—of a quite young couple across the room, was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen; and a dish of some form of food that Rookwood dubbed "tremolo" was so like the couple in general structure that Maisie said it made her feel cannibalistic to eat it. The evening was most enjoyable, and led to a theatre-party, Pleydell bringing Aunt Ellen up on another dental venture which entailed her staying the night. Her artless goodness and evident and immaculate respectability impressed Rookwood strangely, in the odd company of the unconventional girl and the hard-eyed father to whom she bore such strong likeness.

There was also a week-end during which Maisie's father was away "on business." Neither Maisie nor Rookwood knew the sinister nature of that business, nor how close a bearing it would have on their fortunes; but it seemed quite natural, meeting her in the hall on Sunday morning, evidently going for a walk, that the suggestion should be made that they should go together. Maisie's

frank high spirits and Rookwood's charm of manner had made the day a delightful one for both; and the quaint supper provided by Mrs. Fenton in the warm basement kitchen, when they returned late, glowing, tired, and happy, was a finishing touch that gave it all a special intimacy.

Rookwood never told Maisie that he had seen her in the Paris station and watched her in the train and on the steamer. Some fierce objection to hearing of the man from whom she had parted tearfully held him back. It would have embarrassed Maisie also; she dreaded to be reminded of Sefton. What might, however, have interested her was to know that the business that took Rookwood to Paris was the announcement of the death of Madame Meta Pleydell, better known as Meta Rippingsley; and that arrangements had been made to claim on behalf of the Bank the overdraft and interest due for so long, out of the estate of the Hôtel Bienfait.

Rookwood went about his business as if on tip-toe. Everard told him he was an ass to have any relations with such people; but he had come away from the theatre with his hand slipped into Maisie's arm, and his heart revolted from any classification of the bright-faced girl in the same category with her father.

In spite, however, of this growing intimacy, and the knowledge of it that was shared by Everard and the Fentons, his own circle knew nothing of the girl at the lodgings. To his uncle the bank manager, to the affectionate aunts who had been Mrs. Fenton's "young ladies," and their friends, no sough had yet been wafted of the acquaintance that was developing so precociously and that threatened to swamp all other interests outside the business. Rookwood was, therefore, much surprised, on the Monday morning after Maisie had given notice, to get a curious letter, handed in over the Bank counter, on the subject of Miss Peyton. The letter was laboriously

written in capitals, without address but dated; and signed "Arthur Pringle." He had never known an Arthur Pringle, or any Pringles whatsoever, and was doubly mystified.

The letter ran:—"Sir, You are a gentleman and look a decent sort. There is a young girl at No. 29, Percy Street, who is secretary to old Lord John. Her father is an out-and-out bad lot, and she is *now* in danger. In very great danger. I cannot explain what, or how. Can you keep a look-out and see if you can help. If you do not see her or hear her *every day,* ask where she is and *find out.*"

Inquiries about the bearer of the letter gave little result. A rough-looking man, who did not stop a minute. Just lifted his hat, put down the letter, and went out. Not shabby, only rough somehow. Not young; not elderly. Not very big; not small.

Rookwood was dismayed.

The business man in him said: "The daughter of the slimy Peyton, and secretary to that dreadful old Lord John!"

Rookwood had a huge contempt for Lord John and thought that a "secretary" was the last word in foolishness.

"Fancy a secretary for all that tomfoolery!"

The lover in him called aloud, "Who is Maisie in danger from—her father—damn the black-hearted scoundrel? Or the old man upstairs?"

What would it mean? What could they do to her?

An idea came into Rookwood's head. The suffrage campaign, just then pretty violent, had made a lot of talk about the traffic in women. Rookwood knew that some of it was sheer foolishness; but he knew some other things too.

Perhaps this poisonous father was trading his girl to the old man upstairs. Lord John was known to have a

weakness for pretty women; "but I never heard of anything but foolishness and indiscretion. Not vice; the old man isn't vicious," he argued. You never could tell, though, how men would be tempted and how they would behave when tempted, in the case of women. It was a horrid idea; his face burned. Miss Peyton was so very charming, too. He found himself repeating "charming, charming"; in an altogether inane fashion.

"But what has it got to do with me!" he muttered to himself, in mental protest. "Why *me?* What business is it of mine? Who is it that has put *me* on to it?

And then he thought of Fenton.

Now Rookwood did not much like Fenton either; he regarded him as the essence of flunkeydom. But he did like motherly Mrs. Fenton very much indeed; and he felt that he could not do a wiser thing than to confide his dilemma to that excellent woman. She was much flustered when Fenton came down to say that Mr. Rookwood wished to speak to her before she went to bed, if she could spare the time; but was soothed by the information that it was his new socks and the laundry generally, that he was upset about. This was Mrs. Fenton's own province, and showed that Mr. Rookwood was clever as well as kind.

When she came, Fenton was with Pleydell.

"Sit down, Mrs. Fenton; please don't stand."

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Fenton, sitting near the door.

"Come and sit here, please," said Rookwood, putting a chair near his side. "I want to speak to you very confidentially, Mrs. Fenton; it isn't really about the socks. If you are asked, the socks will do. They are getting hard in the wash, and my vests have not had the soap washed out of them, and there are three buttons off my pants—you can make it as long a list as you like. Do you know what I mean? Can I trust you?"

The word "trust" was a trumpet call to Mrs. Fenton.

"I have always been used to be trusted, sir."

"I am sure of that. That is why I have taken the liberty of making this confidence."

"It's no liberty, sir. Please don't say such a thing. I'm very glad, I'm sure, and very proud."

"I am going to read you a letter, Mrs. Fenton. You are not to tell a living soul. It was handed in at the Bank to-day, I do not know who by and I do not know why. It is addressed to me, and dated yesterday. This is the letter."

He read it slowly, then waited to see what she thought. The effect was beyond his expectations. She rocked herself to and fro and moaned in distress.

"Can you tell me what it means?" he asked, kindly.

"Oh yes, sir, I can. At least not exactly, but I can guess. Oh, but that's a bad man. A bad man. I've long been deadly feared of him."

"Which man? Peyton?"

"A bitter bad man, sir; and they'll bring themselves to bad, and no one can say they don't deserve it. Oh, sir, that dear young lady, and so innocent and never thinking of harm . . ." in which she showed a great want of appreciation of Maisie's true character.

"But can you tell me anything definite?" asked Rookwood, anxiously. "What is the 'danger,' do you think? Is she safe now?"

"I couldn't say, sir, not to be certain. Oh, yes, she is quite safe, in her bed and asleep. But I don't know; it might be anything."

"What sort of thing?"

"Well, you see, sir, it's like this. If she have found anything out . . ."

"Found what out?"

"I can't tell you, sir." The poor soul struggled with her strong suspicions and her loyalty to her husband.

"But if she *have* found something out—and her father is bad enough for anything—then he will take it out of her properly. And it look like it, sir. It look like there was others in it, and knew she was in that sort of danger, and wasn't devil enough to stand by and let it be done."

Anthony Rookwood looked long and hard at the distressed woman and began to have some inkling of how things were. In this humdrum household, it seemed, there were seething forces, criminal forces, at work—it would be exciting to find out and expose them. He turned a grave face on Mrs. Fenton, and said:

"You, at any rate, Mrs. Fenton, will help me to take care of this poor girl. Will you let me know, every day, that she is safe, and warn me at once if you know of anything fishy? I don't want to pry into anyone's private affairs; I only want to do the straight thing and help this child to get out of any danger she may be trapped into."

"God bless you, Mr. Anthony. It was a good day for her when that letter got to you. I'll let you know, certain sure, if anything go wrong. Good-night, sir, and God bless you."

She got out of the room with relief and thankfulness, thinking Miss Maisie now would have a real good friend; but who would have thought it of young Mr. Anthony! He didn't seem at all the kind of gentleman who would do things like that—so stiff and so quiet, he always were.

Upstairs, Maisie slept uneasily, but quite unconscious of danger; and in the handsome back-room, Fenton and her father held council.

"The whole thing is complete now," said Pleydell. "The price will be a thumping one and we can retire from business for the present. My man comes over on the second. This is . . . let me see; the twenty-fifth. With anything like decent luck, the dockyard sluggards won't know anything about it for another three weeks."

"I wonder who they will fire?" said Fenton, thoughtfully.

"They would fire the whole lot, if they did their duty," retorted Pleydell. "When I think how easy it was, and how they sucked it down . . ."

"Where are you to meet him?"

"The Boss is to meet him, not me. I have been a bit too conspicuous, I'd rather not go near him. We figured it out last night, and sent the cable."

Fenton moistened his lips.

"Can't seem to believe it's true, Mr. Dick. It doesn't seem possible. Suppose something was to happen?"

Pleydell's face darkened.

"God help anyone who stands in my way," he ejaculated. "A settled income, after all these years of bondage; a settled income, and horses; and a car. God, Fenton, I'd face hell with pleasure for a few years of that before I go there!"

"Has Miss Maisie got any idea, do you think?" Fenton asked, hesitating and a little apologetic.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, Mr. Dick, it's just this. His lordship is in the habit of speaking very free with me, and tells me most things he has in his mind in a general sort of way. But he has pulled himself up rather odd, once or twice, today and yesterday, and particularly to-night. He said something about 'when Miss Peyton's gone' and then stopped and coughed and made a great noise with his throat. I asked, 'When Miss Peyton's gone, my lord?' and he said, 'Did I say anything about her going? Nonsense!' and made another great noise, and then he said, 'Why should she go, why should she go?' And 'poor girl, poor girl, she knows best!' "

There was a tense silence.

"Thanks, Fenton," said Pleydell, at length. "I'll see to it. I'm glad you have told me."

He yawned and stretched; and suddenly Fenton felt a cold chill of fright. The face of the man opposite him was so full of fierce malevolence, it appalled him.

Next day, when Maisie was at work and Lord Johnny was going out for a constitutional in the morning sun, Pleydell joined him on the pavement. After the usual stuff about the weather, he said:

"Has my daughter finally settled to leave your employment, Lord John?"

Lord Johnny looked nonplussed.

"You know it, do you?" he countered.

"I didn't know how much was settled," fibbed Pleydell.

"I needn't say, Peyton, how very much I deplore the decision; but she knows best, she knows best. She is a dear girl, a sweet girl; I shall miss her very much."

Pleydell thought him an old swine; but humoured him.

"I wish I could get her safely married," he said anxiously. "She is too pretty to knock about earning her living."

"I quite agree with you," shouted Lord Johnny. "If it were not for milady, that I haven't set eyes on for more than five years, I'd marry her myself. I would; by the Lord, I would. Dear little girl." His mouthing and mumbling were very nasty to hear.

Pleydell had learnt all he wanted to know. At lunch he sat in grim silence until Fenton had cleared away and left the room. Then he spoke to Maisie.

"Why are you leaving your situation?"

"Because I have had enough of it," she answered, rather curtly.

"What do you propose to do?"

"Get another one."

"Would you mind telling me the reason—if you have a reason?"

"I am not bound to have any reason," replied Maisie, flippantly. "I don't see why I should not do as I like."

"I am rather more concerned, if you would be so good as to attend, that you should do as I like."

"The things you like," retorted Maisie, defiantly, "do not appeal to me. I prefer common honesty, and being able to hold my head up, and not feel ashamed. I know you are not ashamed, any more than my mother was; but it all makes me ashamed. I have had enough of crime, and trickery."

"What crime are you referring to?"

Pleydell's voice was trembling with passion.

"I do not think you had better make me say. I try not to think; if I thought of it, I do not know what I might do. Be very thankful I don't put it into words, they are very ugly words, those three."

Hatred of him leapt, full-grown, into her heart; a hatred she had never felt for her mother. A hot longing to insult him, to fling at him all she knew of him, to let him feel he was at her mercy, possessed her. While he, cursing himself for his folly in wanting to have the girl with him,—a folly based as much on an alien and unavowed sentimentality as on the vague possibilities her good looks had suggested—could have strangled her where she stood.

He debated, long after she left, what he had better do. She knew; and if ever there were a hue and cry, and a wrong man suspected, she might tell. It was useless to trust her. She had seemed such a simple sort of fool; but she was really an astute woman, and dangerous. She must feel very sure of herself, to outface him like that.

Before he could make up his mind what to do, the dockyard discovered its loss. In the evening paper, next day, was the name of the man arrested on suspicion. The very worst thing that could have happened.

Maisie read Lord Johnny the morning news, little thinking that it bore so closely on her own fortunes. In the evening, again she read him the further news of the

arrest. His agitation amazed her. Finally, unable to control himself, he broke out, distractedly.

"Do you remember that plan I lost, that I wanted you to find—plan of a battleship?"

"A battleship? You did not tell me what plan it was. Yes?"

"It is this thing. It was a new design, with a patent arrangement in the gunnery installation. There was a special installation . . . anyone getting that plan would know there was a bit left out, the key to it all. The key part has been stolen, you see," pointing to the newspaper; "it was in the safe, you see it says, it was stolen from Sir Arthur's at Portsmouth. This fellow they have got—he is my godson. It can't be he. It can't be. But he did come here. He came here and was alone in this room."

A shocked exclamation from Maisie.

"You see, I had no business to have the thing. It was brought me in confidence . . ."

"Did you see it after your godson was here?"

"That will take some thinking." He frowned in a deep struggle with his memory. "I can't remember, curse it. But I showed it to Admiral Bayley; and that was afterwards; yes, afterwards. I never saw it after Bayley was here."

"I hope you will be more careful, in future," flashed Maisie. "You have no right to show anyone the things that people bring you in confidence."

This was so entirely a new point of view that Lord Johnny nearly choked with surprise.

Maisie ran up to her room, very miserable. She didn't care whether Lord Johnny rang his bell off; she left him to himself. Here was a man arrested; a man, she was morally certain, who was entirely innocent; and who, even if he proved himself innocent, would be put to serious expense and undeserved suspicion. She was certain her father had the plan; whether he had the rest, or

whether he was merely the jackal for a bigger rascal, she did not know. It was not only theft; it was a betrayal of the country's most valuable secrets. It was the vilest of all crimes. She would have forgiven him sooner, had he been a murderer.

Wednesday evening closed in; and Rookwood was stepping out of the gate, on his way to dine with Capt. Everard. A rough-looking man lounged along, looking leisured though purposeful. He kept up with Rookwood's quick step without difficulty, and then spoke.

"Don't look round. Is the girl at No. 29 safe?"

"Yes," said Rookwood, "she is all right. What is the danger?"

"Her father," said the man, then sheered off and crossed the road, mingling with a group of people outside a public-house. Rookwood's good voice, and his prompt response, gave the Boss confidence that he had got hold of the right man and that Maisie would be well watched over. Fenton had had a few words with the Boss on the subject of the Toff and his daughter; and they were at one in their desire to have nothing to do with savage crimes or vengeances.

"My missus is tremendously taken up with the young lady," said Fenton, apologetically.

"She is a very nice young lady, and as good as she is pretty," said the Boss, reassuringly. "What Almighty Joker gave her that bloody man-tiger for a father?"

They parted on a good understanding, each being glad to find that his other partner was more human than the Toff. Nevertheless, they made no plan for the protection of Maisie. They could not *quite* believe in a man's doing anything too abominable to his own daughter.

Rookwood showed Everard the letter, told him of Mrs. Fenton's emotion, and of his encounter in the road that evening. Everard was immensely pleased; it was an in-

trigue after his own heart. He got a report from Sergeant Ferryman later, that made him still more pleased.

Pleydell cursed the luck that once again, when fortune was within his reach, tangled him up with an innocent victim. It had gone heavily against him, on his trial, that the innocent man who had been allowed to lie under suspicion, had committed suicide twenty-four hours before Pleydell's arrest. This youngster . . . if Maisie tumbled to it and guessed that it was their job, she was capable of any folly. And in his white-hot anger, Pleydell felt capable of any atrocity.

Ernest Glanville was brought before the magistrate's court and formally charged, as a beginning, with an offence against certain Acts. He was then remanded, for the police to pursue their case and possibly to make more charges. Maisie breathed again; it gave her time to think. The thinking went round and round in a circle and always came back to the same thing; either she must put the police on her father's track, or must leave the youth to his fate.

But late that night a third possibility came into her mind. If the things were still in her father's possession . . . ?

The next morning, when Pleydell was whistling and splashing in the bathroom, Maisie invaded his bedroom. In the breast-pocket of his coat the substantial portfolio that never left his person except on some such occasion as this, was reposing peacefully. Inside it was a blue paper, folded in the familiar fashion, and one or two other documents, kept together by an elastic band, all of which, except the plan, she recognized as copies, in Lord Johnny's writing, of matter confided to him by trusting fools. Maisie restored the portfolio to its place and wedged and pinned the packet of papers under her stays. With a calm face but a blazing colour she breakfasted *vis-à-vis* with her father, who was silent and grim, but

utterly unsuspecting—in that fool's paradise of confidence which betrays even the ablest criminals. It had simply never occurred to him that Maisie would search for the documents. His whole thought was centred on the possibility of her making a confession to Lord Johnny or laying an information before the police. In the dread prospect of the latter, it was his intention to hand the batch of papers to the Boss that very evening.

He read the paper searchingly, and, relieved, hummed a tune in his sweet tenor. Maisie went upstairs to Lord Johnny's room. She could not make up her mind what to do with her find. She could not trust this old blunderer. Her contempt for his folly and his cowardice was profound. Her apprenticeship in crooked ways had sharpened her wits, however; and when her father had left the house for the queer Bohemian club that he patronized, she asked Lord Johnny to give her the morning off.

Dressed as inconspicuously as possible, and armed with a veil that had a pattern of spiders' webs on it and which made her almost unrecognizable, Maisie boarded the nearest 'bus. Landing herself at Hammersmith Broadway, she put on the veil in a cloak-room and crossed Brook Green, making her way to Shepherd's Bush, thence to Notting Hill and Westbourne Grove. A handy post-office served to register a plain, long, foolscap-sized envelope, addressed to the Admiralty official from whom the "key" of the plan had been stolen. In a grimy underground ladies' room she removed the veil, and returned home with a sense of high adventure. Pleydell had not yet returned, and she burnt the veil in the sitting-room fire.

Lord Johnny was in a miserable humour; "like a cat on hot bricks," Fenton described him in unlovely amusement, to Pleydell. He could settle to nothing, and had not courage even to go and ask for an interview with his godson. At the Club Admiral Bayley asked him, with

hard-breathing anxiety, whether this wretched business had any connection with that thingumbob he had vetted the other day at Lord Johnny's rooms; and Lord Johnny swore it had not. Over the 'phone came a frantic communication from the idiot who had confided the plan and his own reputation to the clumsy guardianship of England's Only Hope; and that irresponsible old party, goaded beyond endurance, swore the thing was perfectly safe and had never left his keeping for an instant; and then rang off hurriedly, to head off a request that he would return it without delay. There was no peace for him at the Club; and there was that fellow Hardacre—a millionaire, too—prowling, absolutely prowling, among other fellows' coats. It made everything so insecure.

At the House, things were worse, everyone regarding him with pity. Glanville was such a decent youngster, and the old man was known to be fond of him. The case looked awfully black against him, and there were not wanting those who tried to establish some connection between Lord Johnny's nosings and mouthings and the youngster's indiscretion. Lord Johnny went home in a truly unenviable frame of mind, and quite convinced that it was his—Lord Johnny's—pocket handkerchief that Sir Malcolm Junkett, K.C., one of the Whigs, had flourished so theatrically, during a long and boring speech. Junkett was often at the Club. You could not trust those fellows.

Arriving at home, a telegram awaited him. It was from the man he had rung off at the Club, to say he would call as soon as he got to town. The message was peremptory in tone and made Lord Johnny swear loudly and fervently. It was abominable, and an outrage, that he was not to be allowed to have any peace, even in his own digs: a pretty state of things.

The state of things, which included the visit from Carrington, was so "jumpy," and so full of possibilities for

unpleasantness, that Lord Johnny kept tip-toeing to the window and squinting, as far as it was possible to see by stretching and craning his neck, down the street in the direction from which an advance might be expected. Every time the front door bell rang he had a feeling that his inside arrangements were almost as unstable as when he was at sea; and he would listen, and feel hot, and then sick, and then almost faint with unutterable relief when nothing particular happened. At last he was constrained to send for Fenton, and tell him that if anyone called to see him, he, Fenton, was to say Lord Johnny was not at home.

As this was the first time Lord Johnny had ever shown the slightest tendency to deny himself to visitors, the astute Fenton drew his own not unnatural and not inaccurate conclusions.

Rookwood took his new duty conscientiously. Maisie was to be looked after. She was in some unknown danger. He must get to know her better, he felt; otherwise he could not offer to give her his services if ever she needed them. A pleasant opportunity occurred, after dinner, in the hall. Pleydell was off to meet the Boss at the Scullery, and Maisie ran after him with his cigar-case. Rookwood was talking to Mrs. Fenton, and the good woman spoke to her "dear young lady" as she passed. Rookwood was not shy, though quiet; and after a word or two about her spending a lonely evening, asked whether he might call, as he also was alone. Very much pleased, Maisie asked him into the comfortable back-room.

Seated in the big leathern chair, at ease but not sprawling, Rookwood was good to look at. The scene had something of a Raeburn effect—the strong personality of the man, the sombre opulence of his background, the unaffected pose, the grave, quiet manner. Few young men among his contemporaries could have looked like that.

Rookwood was fairly tall, and of large build, bony and muscular. His limbs fell easily into drawing; his head was well set on. The face was a remarkable one, keen, clean-shaven, pale, with a square chin and straight square line of brow, and level, far-reaching eyebrows. He was very dark in colouring. There was an olive tint in the pale skin, and a soft dead blackness of the thick hair, that was unusual and attractive; and with that he had a pair of the softest, truest eyes of the deep warm blue of a summer sky. They were quite out of keeping with the face, and never ceased to be surprising as their intense colour showed between the black lashes and thick white lids.

His voice is adorable, thought Maisie. Deep; deep and soft. It was as conspicuous as his eyes. And Maisie's heart throbbed as she thought, also, "He looks *good!* I wonder if he *is* good, or only another fraud! He looks, oh! so good and trustworthy!" And, absurdly, she had a sudden desire to take him with her to the Simpsons' and show him the ugly woman and the uncouth children made lovely by goodness and love.

He talked of enthralling things. Wanderings in distant by-ways, in Spain and Portugal, Greece and Albania, Asia Minor and the Black Sea, strange and picturesque people, bloody affrays, weird festivals, hair-breadth escapes—she listened spell-bound. He was not one of the men who pretend to be too modest to tell of the dangers dared and risks run—not the Strong Silent Man of Seton Merriman's novels, who would drive any woman not a congenital idiot to murder or divorce in a fortnight. He could make one see and feel what he had seen and felt. The time sped; and all too soon, Pleydell's latchkey was heard in the door. They rose to receive him; and were stricken speechless by the devil in his eyes.

With a desperate effort, Pleydell pulled himself together and accepted Rookwood's presence with some-

thing of his native courtesy. Drinks were produced; and when the first glass was poured out, Maisie quite suddenly said Good-night. Not until her room door was locked did she feel safe. It was quite plain to her that her father had discovered his loss. And when, having got rid of Rookwood as soon as decency permitted, Pleydell knocked peremptorily on her door and called her to wake and open, she lay in silence and made no answer. A torrent of low-voiced blasphemy poured in on her unavailingly.

In the morning Pleydell said nothing to her, having apparently changed his tactics. Before she went up to her secretarial duties, a grubby note, lying on the mantelpiece, caught her eye.

"Who brought this, I wonder?" she said, opening it. It was addressed to "Miss Maisie," and at first she thought it must be from Mrs. Fenton. But it was from the Boss, asking her to meet him that evening in Mauleverer Street. She could not find out how it had come, for neither Fenton nor his wife admitted taking it in. It never occurred to her to think of her father, for the note said, "Don't let your father know."

Towards evening she slipped out unnoticed, while Mrs. Fenton was out doing some errand. In Mauleverer Street it was dark and only partially lighted; and she started as a man came up behind her and slipped an arm through hers.

"All right" came in the Boss's reassuring voice at the same time; and she was guided two steps up off the pavement to the door of an unoccupied house. Its dreary legend, To Let, crossed the staring windows of the ground floor. One slight push, and the door opened; the Boss drew her inside, closing it softly behind them.

CHAPTER XXI

LOST, STOLEN, OR STRAYED

THE next morning, the daily Press announced, in every varying form that could obscure truth or suggest a lie, that the documents stolen from the Dockyard authorities had been restored. Some pointed their suggestions so as to make it appear that they had been restored by a mysterious and unknown agency, some that the accused man had made restitution; some that the police had astutely found the right clue, and some that a great gang of international criminals had been run to earth. It was conjectured, diversely and conversely, that the return or discovery of the stolen property had entirely exonerated the prisoner and that it had materially strengthened the case against him.

Pleydell felt like murdering his daughter three times over when he read these outpourings. The chance of his life, upset by the niminy-piminy scruples of a girl! He walked up and down, his evil face strained and seared with rage. What cursed luck—what a "down" Fate had on him, always to trip him up like this. There was no seeing how it all would end; and if he could have managed it, he would have engineered an immediate departure for a more healthy climate. He had a notion, however, that the unwholesome-looking person who chatted with the policeman at the corner, and with the frequenters of the respectable public-house at the other end of the street, was a plain-clothes man. If that were so, an attempt at flight would be madness. Waiting and doing nothing was the very devil, but it had got to be faced. That girl . . .

The veins in Dick the Toff's forehead swelled when he thought of her.

Lord Johnny's bell was ringing, ringing. His angry shouting voice was heard, bawling at Fenton. The discreet "Yes, m'lord, I couldn't say, m'lord" of this admirable person did not carry beyond the doorway, but m'lord's bawlings were heard by the other lodgers. Where was Miss Peyton? Don't know? Not slept here? Why the devil wasn't I told?

Rookwood heard this, pausing in the hall to put his coat on. He dived into the basement and ran against a shaking, white-lipped Mrs. Fenton.

"Where is she?" he asked, hoarsely. Mrs. Fenton threw her arms up and then clutched them round her body.

"What has that devil done—do you know?" he whispered; and when she shook her head, groaned.

"When was she seen last?"

"I left her here, the dear lamb, when I went out at about five yesterday afternoon."

Fenton came downstairs. Rookwood looked at him squarely.

"Fenton, I heard Lord John shouting about Miss Peyton, and Mrs. Fenton does not seem to know where she is. What has happened?"

"Nothing, sir," was the prompt answer, "only his lordship don't like not to have been told, sir. It does put him about, rather, and so busy as he is."

"Do you know where Miss Peyton has gone to?"

"To stay with her aunt and uncle, sir, somewhere near Brighton. It is the first time they ever asked her, and it coming by telegram and they expecting her at once for some private theatricals, Mr. Peyton, sir, sent her off at once. It will do her good, sir, to have a nice change with other young ladies and gentlemen. It is always so very quiet here, sir."

Rookwood watched the man's inscrutable face, and looked from him to his wife. She too was watching, unable to judge whether he spoke truth or falsehood; unable, too, to shake off her heavy suspicions. But later, when she found the tossed-about disorder of her young lady's room, with the dressing-bag and suit-case gone, she was convinced; although the missing articles, with a very quaint assortment of Maisie's clothes snatched up at hazard by her unnatural parent, were no further away than a big stair-cupboard receptacle for rubbish in an attic in the roof.

Rookwood repaired to the office in a queer state of mind. The man spoke frankly and reasonably, and was respectful and deferential, as usual. But Rookwood did not, for some reason he could not analyse, believe one word he said. He made up his mind he would ask Peyton for the address. Ask him boldly, right out, and press for it. Then go and see if she were really there. Yes. He would do it. Mrs. Fenton's fright seemed to him more convincing and more eloquent than any reasoning. She *knew* there was danger.

The evening papers were if possible more mystifying, more incoherent and more contradictory than their morning contemporaries. On one point only were they agreed —that Glanville denied the slightest knowledge of the plans or their theft. When asked whether he had anything to say, he roused himself with a start, as if from a reverie, and smiled contemptuously. "Anything to say?" he repeated, in derision. "No. Nothing except that I think you are all dotty! Any fool would know I could never do such a thing." All the fools present stared at him as if he had said something atrocious; but his Worship looked at him sharply under frowning brows, and made a note on the sheet of paper before him.

"You realize," said his Worship, with a curiously

kindly inflection in his voice, "the very serious nature of the charge, and of your position?"

"Of course I do, sir," answered the youngster, eagerly; "it's awful. But you know very well I could never do such a thing."

His Worship hurried on to the next business, and Glanville was removed from the dock. A little girl—daughter of a poverty-stricken naval officer with a big family—to whom he was engaged, had come from Plymouth to see him. The journey had absorbed all her poor savings; and she sobbed like a tired child, wailing on his shoulder, "I did try to be brave; I meant to be brave; but it is too horrible to hear them say such things about you." The two sad young things were a source of great solicitude to the kindly police constables, who fetched them hot tea and told them to cheer up, and never to say die so long as there was a shot in the locker.

Rookwood read the newspaper account of Glanville's words to the magistrate, and formed an instant opinion of his innocence. He thought it infinitely pathetic, and did one of those impulsive things of which no one would have believed him capable. He sent a wire to the accused lad saying, "Forgive perfect stranger sending sincere hopes that your innocence be completely vindicated. Feel sure truth will out." After sending it, with his full name and address, he went about feeling like a theatrical idiot and blushed whenever he remembered his folly. Had he known the pleasure his sentimental outburst gave to poor young Glanville, and the new hope that sprang up after getting this unsolicited message from a stranger, he would have felt it to be worth while.

Meanwhile the police were making frantic efforts to trace the means by which the missing documents were returned. Glanville had no relatives in London, and no intimate friends there. His people were Devonshire folk, and all his leave was spent in the West Country. His

only connection with London was Lord Johnny, his father's old chum and his god-father. The only times he had ever stayed in town since his school days had been when he was a guest at No. 29 Percy Street. Unfortunately, his position at Portsmouth made it possible for him to have had access to one set of confidential documents, and also brought him into touch with a great number of assorted aliens; any and every one of whom might have associates in Westbourne Grove, or any other part of London.

"Aliens would never have sent the stuff back," snorted the stout inspector at the Portsmouth police-station. "They wouldn't have cared how he got on, once they had got hold of the stuff. We can put aliens out of it, once for all."

"P'raps you'd like to put *him* out of it!" sneered the detective-inspector, who clung to the notion of aliens, believing them to be at the root of all the demoralization of the British people both physical and moral.

"You're right; so I would. He never done it, poor youngster. He's as straight as—straight. But he is our only chance of finding out about it."

"What do you mean?" asked the detective-inspector, opening a pair of bulging eyes widely.

Inspector Porteous leant across the table, and struck the palm of one hand impressively with three fingers of the other.

"It's your business to know, but I'll tell you," he said. "That stuff was sent back by someone who does not want the lad to come to harm. See? It was sent back to help him through. So long as he is in trouble, that person or persons will be uneasy and may be induced to give themself away. Put your teeth on that, Robertson. It is the only way you are going to get hold. The burglary at Sir Arthur's shows the expert, doesn't it? An old hand; very like Slim Jim's work. What is the connection between

Slim Jim, or someone of that style, and anyone who is so soft that they will chuck up a paying proposition to get this youngster out of a mess."

Detective-Inspector Robertson pondered this darkly, while Porteous looked at him with steady eyes. Presently he went on.

"Fancy a registered letter, and a registered letter to a well-known name like Sir Arthur's, just after he had been made so public in the papers, all through this burglary of his safe."

"Well," said the detective, "there's another possibility too. It might be an unwilling accomplice—a woman, perhaps. Did it without their knowing."

The two considered this idea further.

"Very dangerous game, that, if she is dealing with bony fyde crooks," concluded Inspector Porteous. "I wouldn't care to take risks like that myself. Well. I suppose time will show."

Rookwood cast the *Evening Standard* aside and rose, stretching himself. Lighting a cigar, he paced up and down the room for a few minutes; then opened his door, crossed the passage and knocked at the retreat in which Dick the Toff was sulking and fuming. An impatient "*Come* in!" rewarded him.

"Hullo! Oh, good evening, Rookwood. I was not expecting anyone." This rather pointedly.

"Good evening, Mr. Peyton. I do not want to disturb you. I only came to know if you could give me your daughter's address."

If Rookwood had asked for the Crown jewels, Pleydell could not have been more surprised.

"My daughter's address?" he asked, frowning. "What for? What do you want with her?"

"I promised her I would run down," answered Rook-

wood, coolly. "She said you would give me the address."

There was a tense silence.

Rookwood's audacity daunted the older man. Pleydell had the best of reasons for knowing that the statement was not true, but could not state those reasons.

He wondered, in panic uncertainty, how much Rookwood knew, how far it was safe to defy him. On the other hand, Rookwood himself did not know how near or how far from the actual truth his own statement was. He still did not know for certain that Maisie was not with her aunt at Brighton. Both were gambling, at a hazard neither of them could truly estimate; and Pleydell, at any rate, was completely at a loss.

Smiling engagingly, however, he kept the conversational ball rolling.

"I really don't know, my dear fellow, really I don't know, I don't quite know whether I altogether—er, I don't want to say *approve;* but is it *quite* the thing for you to follow my daughter about when she is on a visit—a man she hardly knows, you know? You see the awkward position for me, don't you?"

Rookwood watched him steadily.

"I am sorry you should feel it is awkward," he said. "It is so very ordinary a thing to do, now-a-days."

"I hope," said Pleydell, gravely, "that my girl will not pick up these—er—modern ways and ideas."

Rookwood laughed.

"Oh, come, Mr. Peyton, Miss Peyton is modern enough, in all conscience. You are not going to suggest that she is Early Victorian, are you? A capable and independent young lady like that, who earns her own living? Besides, I can't see her without calling on her aunt, and that would be vastly proper."

The sarcasm in his voice stung the older man.

"I am afraid I do not approve," he replied, stiffly. "I should be much obliged, Mr. Rookwood, if you will be

so good as not to try to approach my daughter in that way. It does not fall in with my views. I may be old-fashioned, but that is how I feel; and I cannot accept the position that only the young people have a right to have views on these matters."

"Well, then," pursued Rookwood, "if you will let me have the address, I will write and explain why I do not come."

Again the dark blue and the pale blue eyes exchanged a challenge.

"I am afraid I do not see my way to approving of that either," said Pleydell. "That would, it seems to me, be making too much of the business. You can explain when she comes back; and I will mention my reasons, when I write to her, for asking you not to go."

His annoyance was palpable and his tone sharp. Rookwood nodded.

"I thought you would not give it me," he remarked, reflectively, eying the polished ruffian with great interest.

"I am glad you formed so just an estimate of my sense of propriety," retorted Pleydell.

Rookwood smiled engagingly.

"I was hardly thinking about propriety," he answered. "I hope Miss Peyton will soon be back, so that I can explain to her personally; meanwhile, good-night, Mr. Peyton. Please let me apologize for disturbing you."

He closed the door behind him, leaving Pleydell shaking with anger and apprehension.

Fenton was told of Rookwood's intrusion when he brought up the tray of glasses and toddy. He listened with inscrutably decorous face.

"Our luck is dead out," Pleydell observed, uneasily. "It has been so easy until now; but this is bad."

Fenton shook his head deferentially.

"Mr. Rookwood, he heard Lord Johnny calling for Miss Maisie and asking why she had gone; and he came

down to the basement to ask the missis about it. By good luck I got down there and told him about the aunt and uncle. He seemed quite satisfied, or made believe to be. Since then, the missis, *she* asked me, where *was* it, and what was the lady's *name*."

"What did you say?" drawled Pleydell, pouring out a stiff tot of whisky.

"I told her to keep from meddling in other people's affairs, and how could I know the lady's name and address if she didn't herself that has had much more to do with Miss Maisie than anyone else."

"Is she suspicious?"

"Lor' bless you, sir, she's halways suspicious! I never take no notice. She is one of them good women, the ole-fashion kind, that thinks it is against all the Commandments to go back on your husband. That sort is quite safe, Mr. Dick, no matter what they suspects."

Mr. Dick nodded. The supreme folly of the good women was one of the crowning mercies of Providence.

"There's a 'teck down the road, Mr. Dick," said Fenton, presently, with a deprecating cough. "At least, I think he's a 'teck."

Pleydell nodded gloomily.

"I think so too," he growled. "Not that it follows that it has anything to do with us."

They were in evil case, suspicious and anxious and of a mood to see danger everywhere. Fenton went off, on an errand in itself risky; but he had to see the Boss somehow. It was more risk to shirk risk than to take it, in some cases.

Rookwood strolled round towards ten o'clock that night to find his friend Capt. Everard. This gentleman was delighted to see him, and looked forward to the shock he was going to administer with real enjoyment. He was still new enough to his job to be pleased and excited about the details.

"Heard anything more from your mysterious informant?" he asked Rookwood, as the latter helped himself to whisky.

"No," answered Rookwood, "have you found anything out for me?"

Then Everard handed him Sergeant Ferryman's report.

"I say!" ejaculated Rookwood, as he read it.

Everard leant back in his big leathern chair, the tips of the fingers of each hand tapping against those of the other hand; his legs crossed, the toepoint describing a circle in the air. He enjoyed Rookwood's surprise. He enjoyed his own discovery. He enjoyed the whole thing and looked forward to enjoying it more.

"Your friend Peyton is the swindler Pleydell, who nearly allowed an innocent man to be hanged and who certainly allowed another rogue to be murdered. He is a very unsafe guardian of youth and beauty."

"The man seems to be some sort of a devil," exclaimed Rookwood, in great disgust. "And do you know, the girl has gone!"

"Gone where?"

"I don't know, but they say to her uncle and aunt near Brighton. I know she has such an aunt; I have met her, but cannot recall her name. They are supposed to have summoned her by telegram."

"Telegram to her?"

"M-m," nodded Rookwood.

"I will soon find out about that," remarked Everard, making an entry in a book laboriously extracted from an unforeseen pocket somewhere in the tops of his trousers. "What do you suspect?"

Rookwood told of his interviews with Mrs. Fenton and with Pleydell, and his belief, based on nothing that he could cite, that Fenton had been lying.

"I shall not be happy until I have seen that the girl is safe," he added. "No one seems to have seen her go."

"I suppose her father would say he saw her go!" retorted Everard. "But there is a possible alternative, my dear chap. Perhaps she didn't go. Perhaps she is still in the house!"

"I will find her if she is," declared Rookwood, with his stubborn look. And then the thought of himself in this melodramatic setting made him laugh aloud.

"What would they say at the Bank?" he shouted. "My poor old uncle!"

Next day, when Fenton, as was his unvarying custom, had strolled across to the respectable public-house at the corner, and Dick the Toff was sleeping softly in the big leathern chair under the soothing influences of an excellent lunch and several glasses of the Madeira, Rookwood rang his bell for Mrs. Fenton.

During the time that had elapsed since his visit to Everard, Rookwood had done some hard thinking. All night his brain had worked; all the morning's work had been punctuated with the sentence, "Your friend Peyton is the swindler Pleydell." He remembered hearing of the great fraud successfully engineered by a managing clerk and this Pleydell, and another man connected with the firm, who was murdered. An innocent man was suspected of the murder, cold-shouldered, ruined, and driven by the threatening shadow of the gallows to suicide. The murderer and Pleydell stood in the dock together and one was hanged and the other sent to fifteen years' penal servitude. This super-rascal was the father of Maisie.

And Rookwood was the lineal representative of a proud strain of county repute, who had gone into business and made their name a synonym for the loftiest integrity. No stain tarnished their record, in public or private life. Was it seemly, was it fair to his uncle and to his business, that he should let himself be ensnared by the daughter, however fair, of such people as Pleydell the convict and Meta

Rippingsley? For, Rookwood now recognized the symptoms of his state of mind and knew what it was he felt about Maisie.

He knew, too, a great deal about Meta Rippingsley. When he was quite a boy, that bright particular star had been more more or less conspicuous. Her living statuary effects, derived from an unblushing display of handsome legs and shoulders and a gift of pose as remarkable as her looks, had been a great feature of life about town. On the Continent she was no less well known, and the story of how she had bluffed the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo, and won his winnings from him on a doubles-or-quits toss, had a wide circulation. The Mrs. Pleydell with grey hair and a pretty daughter was unrecognizable as dashing dare-devil Meta Rippingsley, who could stow away more brandy neat than even a Russian prince, and who had done a high-kick, from behind, over a certain Royal Highness's head just at the moment when a great star of the operatic world was being presented to him at a celebrated reception in the world of Art.

This audacious creature, with neither morals nor modesty, was Maisie's mother. What a connection for Anthony Rookwood, of the Rookwoods of Bloor, and the Bank of London!

He reflected, darkly, that he knew nothing of Maisie's past existence or of her past associates. Meta Rippingsley, as a mother, did not promise well, in the matter of associates. He knew Meta Rippingsley to have been the wife of Pleydell the swindler, for at the time of the trial a good deal of sympathy was expressed for her. Maisie had told him that she had lived with her mother "after leaving school," and that her mother was dead; indeed, the death, and the past triumphs of that lady had been duly chronicled in such press organs as take note of such things and had concerned Rookwood and his bank

as a matter of business; but Maisie had not been very communicative on any subject connected with her past. Rookwood almost wished he had gone to the Hôtel Bienfait in person, when in Paris. The tall grey man might have belonged there . . .

There had been that week-end when Pleydell had been away. They had gone to Richmond, and walked in the Park; and then to the river, where they drifted lazily and talked. He remembered, with pain, that never had she let herself go to the extent of telling him anything intimate. Who and what was her mother's household? And who was the man who had kissed her at the station in Paris? A great and devouring jealousy of Maisie's past settled on him.

He wondered, also, being no fool, whether Pleydell the swindler had been throwing his daughter at his—Rookwood's—head. He had certainly managed to give Rookwood's request for her address a very embarrassing turn. For the life of him Rookwood could not decide whether it was that the necessity of the case made it imperative for him to hold Rookwood off, or that there was a planned attempt to entangle him in some compromising suggestion of an affair of honour with the daughter.

It was a puzzled and mentally weary man who rang the bell for Mrs. Fenton.

That terrified person was in a state that she herself described as all nerves. When the suggestion was made to her that her young lady might be actually in durance under her very roof, it threw her into such extremes of agitation, as put Rookwood to the test of all his ingenuity. Much tact was required to restore her to calm and to get her to accompany him on a voyage of discovery, what time Pleydell slept and Fenton was away. Rookwood's own decision hardened in the course of the contest, and it became clear to him that the first thing to do,

the thing of the utmost importance, was to find Maisie. Then he could think of his own feelings and intentions.

There was no room for suspicion in Maisie's own bedroom or her father's, nor the bathroom and dressing-room on the landing. Short of being murdered and packed under the flooring, she could not have been concealed on or between the first and second floors. The third floor had one large empty room that had never been used, and had lately been done up and decorated for letting for the first time. Beside it was a box-room and a sort of maid's closet where pails, brooms, sinks, cupboards, taps, and linen-press were not only inartistically but most inconveniently jumbled together, to the eternal distress of the charwoman. This closet was low-ceilinged; and a ladder-stair ran up into a sort of loft in the roof above, where was the cistern or cisterns, which one could reach by taking a perilous course from rafter to rafter. A small window gave out on to the leads whence a handsome view of the neighbours' chimney-pots could be enjoyed.

After inspecting the bedrooms on the second floor, and the bath and dressing-rooms, Rookwood suddenly said, "What about the cellars?"

Mrs. Fenton fell into a fit of trembling.

"I can't abide the thought of the cellars," she gasped. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Anthony, I have been thinking of the cellars ever since I heard my lamb was gone."

Rookwood's face took on a queer expression. Without a word more, they went down to the basement.

The cellar door was down a short flight of steps which ran from a small flagged lobby outside the Fentons' comfortable living quarters. The door had a twisted, sinister expression, almost like a living creature. It opened over three more downward steps, and then there was another door, heavily bolted. All over the dank premises they searched, the frightened woman holding aloft a lantern and listening nervously the while for sounds of Fenton's

return. No slightest sign of hidden, or possibly hidden retreat, in which a human being could be incarcerated, was revealed; and although Mrs. Fenton kept on repeating that the place gave her the shudders, it seemed a perfectly straightforward, unromantic cellar with no stain on its reputation other than its extreme darkness. Rookwood called softly, "Miss Peyton," several times, while they stopped to listen; Mrs. Fenton gasped, "Miss Maisie dearie"; but with no result.

It was with intense relief that she shut the sinister-looking door, hung the heavy keys back on their nail, and removed all traces of their peregrination from Rookwood's clothes and her own. A bit of cobweb, or of green mould, would have betrayed them to Fenton.

"I'm going up-stairs again," said Rookwood; and softly they mounted the well-carpeted stairs, and set to the inspection of the third floor. The lumber room revealed little of interest; the loft no more than an evil smell of mice; and once more they were retiring discomfited when Rookwood made a discovery.

The ladder-like stair into the roof was boarded in at the side and back. A bent nail projected round the corner; it twisted round as Rookwood brushed against it, and allowed the back boarding to open as if it were a cupboard door.

"I forgot that stair-cupboard!" exclaimed Mrs. Fenton. "I declare I did. There now!"

Rookwood struck a match and stooping, looked into the cupboard space. Then he threw the match behind him, knelt on one knee and reached into the recess. Drawing himself back with difficulty, he pulled out and held up to view a bunch of fluffy black and white materials, which resolved themselves into an evening dress and wrap, two smart blouses and some gloves and scarves.

"Oh, my lamb, my lamb," lamented Mrs. Fenton, in paroxysms of woe. "What have they done to you? What have they done to my lamb!"

"Sh, sh!" checked Rookwood. "Don't make a sound, now. Keep hold of yourself, Mrs. Fenton, do you hear? Be quiet now, and help me."

He handed her the medley of garments he retrieved, and then pulled out the suit-case with "M. F. Pleydell" written on it, that had belonged to Maisie's mother. All the things were packed into it—it already contained stockings, shoes, petticoats and a hat—and it was taken down to Rookwood's bedroom and locked in the wardrobe. Then, with the key in his pocket, Rookwood made for Scotland Yard, while Mrs. Fenton cowered miserably in her basement, sick with terror and suspense, waiting in dread for her husband to return, listening with beating heart to the least sound from that luxurious back room where an evil man dozed and plotted.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STOWAWAY

"MIND the step," warned the Boss; and Maisie minded. She realized that she was in the hall of the house; and that the swing-door which they passed in the darkness probably led into the servants' quarters. Holding her arm, her companion led her down a long stone-floored passage, and into what was plainly a servants' hall, where a bit of candle burning in a biscuit-box gave a faint light. The Boss shut the door behind them and released her arm.

It was his heavy breathing that first made her feel afraid.

"What is all this about?" she asked. "Why have you brought me here?"

"We can talk quietly here," answered the Boss. "You had better sit down, hadn't you? This will hold."

"This" was a very unreliable bench; and Maisie looked at it in distaste.

"I do not care to sit down, thank you. Will you tell me what you want to see me about?"

"I want to warn you of the danger you are running," he said, shortly.

"What danger?"

"About those papers you took out of your father's pocket."

Maisie understood.

"Are you in it too?" she asked, scornfully.

"See here, Miss Pleydell, don't misunderstand me. It is no joking business, really, I give you my word. I am

not the kind of man to make mountains out of molehills; but your father and his partners stood to make thousands out of that deal and you have queered it. He is not the forgiving sort; and he has jolly few scruples. I have only just got you out of his way in time."

Maisie stood irresolute. The man's manner was impressive; he knew how to make it so.

"What could he possibly do?" she asked; "I am not in the least afraid, I can assure you."

But she knew she was afraid.

"If you are not, I am," answered the Boss. "I have never seen anyone in such an evil rage; and, perhaps, you do not know as well as I do the kind of things that can happen. Anyway, I've risked your being mad with me rather than the other risk. You can't trust a man with a temper like his. Don't you risk it, Miss Maisie. Don't."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, rather piteously.

"Stay here for a bit," he pleaded. "I fixed a room up for you—it isn't what you are used to, but it is clean, and *safe*. You will be quite safe, quite; and Mrs. Fenton will send your clothes . . ."

"Does Mrs. Fenton know, then?" asked Maisie eagerly; and the Boss saw that his bow, drawn at a venture, had made a good shot.

"Of course she does," he replied, "and hopes you will be advised by us. And if you will tell her what to do, she will make some quiet arrangement to get you away from your father in a day or two."

"I have nowhere to go," began Maisie, rather forlornly.

There had been a note in the Boss's voice when he said "I have risked your being mad with me rather than the other risk," that filled her with unutterable concern. Sefton, Lord Johnny; and now this man . . .

"Did you not tell me something about an aunt of

yours?" asked the Boss, who was very cleverly playing the double part of accomplice to the father and anxious guardian to the girl, suspected by neither.

"My aunt would be no use," said Maisie, quickly. "She could never believe my father would do anything cruel or bad; and she would probably tell him . . . No. I must think of something; Mrs. Simpson, perhaps . . . Shall you be seeing Mrs. Fenton?"

The Boss nodded reassuringly.

"Soon," he said.

"Will you bring her to see me, then?"

He hesitated; then said:

"Yes; why not?"

"That will be best," said Maisie. "You bring her here, and tell her I will stay here until she comes. And when she comes, please to bring me my savings-bank book, and my dispatch case, and keys. And my dressing bag, and some clean clothes."

"I knew you would take a sound view of things," he said, heartily; "and it was only for fear of your father guessing something that Mrs. Fenton did not tell you all about it herself. Come this way, will you, Miss Pleydell. I'll light you along; there are a few steps here."

He opened the further door, and then took the biscuit-box with the spluttering candle-end and proceeded to lead the way.

It all seemed hopelessly unreal to Maisie; of a piece with the crazy pattern into which her life had been woven. She was genuinely alarmed; and to be shut in some fastness in this empty house in a more than doubtful neighbourhood seemed only one degree less terrifying than the possible vengeance of her irate parent. Mrs. Fenton's supposed approval was a moral support, indeed; she must, Maisie thought, have a good opinion of the Boss; and that was comforting.

Silently she followed him into the dimly lit darkness.

It took them along a short passage, down a short stair, and along another short passage at right angles. Near the end of it was a door ajar, inside which a light showed.

The room was small, and decently furnished. Fortunately, Maisie did not know the uses to which it had been put, during the three years in which the house had stood untenanted. A small window, high up, looked out into the recesses of the dark entrance through which one gained access to the Vaults. The only air, therefore, that found its way to the room was foul and fetid; of light there was scarcely any at all. But as yet she did not know this.

The Boss showed her where to find things—biscuits, soap, methylated spirits for boiling the kettle, matches, candles, tea, etc. There was a supply of all these things, and there were cigarettes, sweets, and a bundle of six-penny books. Then he said "Good-night," in his curt fashion, adding, "You won't mind my locking you in? It is safer."

He left the room, locking the door behind him.

Then Maisie thought of all the things she ought to have said and asked. Annoyance kept her awake all night.

Early in the morning she washed, and made herself some tea; and at about seven o'clock the Boss arrived with a hot plate containing bacon and eggs, and a loaf wrapped in a clean cloth. She opened her plan of campaign at once.

"Thank you ever so much," she said, genially; "but, you know, I really do not think I ought to let you take all this trouble. It would save ever such a lot of bother if I went to the friend who is expecting me; and I am afraid that that friend may make a bother if I don't turn up."

"A friend expecting you?" said the Boss, quickly. "What friend?"

"It is not anyone you know," replied Maisie, smiling brightly. "But I had to make some arrangement, you see; I could not dream of staying with my father after what happened. So this friend knows there is trouble, and may make a fuss if I do not turn up; and it is because I took those precautions, you see, that I really did not feel afraid. You made me feel afraid last night" —another bright smile—"but thinking things over, I seem to feel that my first plan was the best, and that I had better stick to it."

"You are your father's own daughter," thought the Boss, as he listened to this cool statement, "and God knows how much of all that is true or false. And we thought you simple, too! Proper fools, we were."

Aloud, he said:

"I'll fetch Mrs. Fenton over at once, then; and you and she can fix things up. I'll lock this door now, same as last night, so that no one can disturb you. It is a queer part of the world, you know, and some odd parties knocking about."

Maisie wondered how much of her tale he believed; and took a sort of horror at herself for her easy flow of lies. To keep from thinking, she turned to the pile of cheap literature, dirty and thumbed though it was. The hours passed away; tea, bread and butter and potted meat filled the hungry void in the absence of proper meals; and darkness closed in, leaving her still alone.

The Boss had, of course, this advantage of Maisie, that he had seen the newspaper accounts of the return of the Dockyard plans; and by this time he was almost as angry as Pleydell. Only that he had no mind to be mixed up in any wild outbreak of revenge, he would have refrained from further meddling. It was his fear of Pleydell's temper that had made him kidnap Maisie; and his interview with his partner, on the occasion of the discovery of the loss of their stolen property, had been so stormy a

one that he had insisted on her being handed over to his care at once.

The Boss had pointed out that any scheme of revenge on Maisie was calculated to rouse Mrs. Fenton, whom he suspected of not being quite so much the altogether "good" woman that she was represented to be by her husband. He also "wasn't going to be mixed up with anything of that sort"—whatever "that sort" was. He had undertaken to snare Maisie and get the papers back if possible, and keep her safely where she could not communicate with the police until they could all get away to some peaceful land in which they could enjoy their spoils unquestioned. And although there was little danger, they opined, for the Boss and Fenton, and it was Pleydell whom Maisie would inform on, if she made up her mind to do so, it did not do to run unnecessary risks.

It was Pleydell's temper the Boss was afraid of. Not so much that he would actually scheme to murder his daughter but that in his violence he would drive her into denouncing him. She was safely disposed of now; but unluckily the papers, on which so much depended, were safely disposed of too, and the well-laid scheme was wrecked.

The Boss had undertaken to brow-beat, or cajole, or starve her, into giving up the papers or telling where they were; but nothing would get them back now. What a devil of a rage the Toff must be in! The question was, what was to be done?

The Boss cursed himself for not having kept Maisie and her father apart. What a God-forsaken fool he had been, to let the man take a girl like that into the show! What a triple-plated ass Pleydell was to go soft at the sight of her and want to have her living with him as his daughter! What blasted, blinded fools they all had been to think any good purpose would be

served by letting her be that old mouldy-head's secretary. And above all, what an inconceivable condemned idiot he had been to give that warning to Rookwood.

He had said in the letter, to be sure and see or hear her every day. The Toff would have to pitch some good yarn and substantiate it somehow. . . . Oh, what a mess it all was! Sheer, damn foolishness from beginning to end; and men like them, too! Who would believe it? A girl of twenty, taken them all in, seemed so simple, and here was this yarn of hers about people expecting her! Oh Lord! What the hell was to be done about it?

Who was this precious "friend"? Was it Rookwood, the Boss wondered; and in wondering, felt a sudden heat of passion. It was not all on account of the lost papers.

Late that night the Boss, disguised as an old man with a dirty beard, opened Maisie's door, removed the dirty water and utensils, brought hot supper, and thrust in her dressing-bag. He did not want Maisie to ask questions about Mrs. Fenton's non-arrival or her own detention; and rightly guessed that she would be seriously frightened of this unknown and savage-looking old man. She did just as he calculated she would do —shrank to the further end of the room in silence, too much alarmed for speech. Later on she ate the supper provided, but sat up far into the morning, starting at each sound, faint with foul air and dread, and wondering in ever-increasing dismay what danger it was that really threatened her.

Mrs. Fenton did not dare wait up to see Rookwood on his return the night they found the clothes behind the stair, for fear of rousing her husband's suspicions. She heard her lodger come in, as she lay uneasily, and longed to know what he had to say. Fenton had been in an ill humour; he had grumped unpleasantly all the

evening. She began to wish heartily that the detective officer that he feared so much would really come; come for that evil man on the ground floor and get him out of her house. She wondered how far Fenton was implicated in any wicked schemes of his.

Mrs. Fenton only suspected danger. She knew nothing definite. She was aware that Fenton practised certain forms of blackmail; but she had not known any details, of late. She had preferred not to know when crooked things were going on; now she devoutly wished she did know. It never dawned on her to what an extent Lord Johnny's foolishness could be exploited, nor did she know how much more money was in their hands than they had ever earned through the letting of No. 29. Even had she known it, she would not have been altogether enlightened; for Fenton had frequent "flutters," and money was occasionally made on the turf by his judicious selections. He was a careful and conscientious backer.

She had an idea, however, that there was something in the balance, although she knew not what. There was something of suppressed excitement and expectation—in some way she knew things to be nearing a crisis. She had not lived all those years with Fenton not to know that much; and it was terrifying to be kept in the dark.

In the morning, she was in great haste to get into Mr. Anthony's bedroom, feeling sure he would come in while she was there, or call her into the sitting-room when Fenton was elsewhere engaged. And so it fell out.

All that Rookwood had to tell her was that inquiries were to be made about the telegram said to have come from the Brighton district. That was the first step. Everard would see to it. He would come there to lunch and tell them. Would Mrs. Fenton arrange lunch for two? This as Fenton was coming in.

"Certainly, Mr. Anthony, sir; Mr. Fenton will see to

it. But I am really put out about the socks, sir. It does seem a pity and them quite new."

Thus they tried to cover their plotting.

At lunch Everard brought news.

No telegram had been received for that address at all, on the day in question. So Maisie had not been sent for by wire. And the constable on the beat had seen Fenton come out with a dressing-bag or something of that nature, the next evening after dark. He had taken a taxi from the rank. The rank men all knew Fenton, and the driver had by good luck been found at once, on the rank. He had driven Fenton to an irreproachable address in Portland Place; and Fenton had gone down the area to the kitchen quarters. So far, nothing in the least suspicious, from the normal point of view; but liable to furnish clues, under the circumstances.

One question which interested Everard more than all the others was, what had been done, or was going to be done, or was being done, that would make Pleydell want to have Maisie out of the way? It must be something fairly big. Rookwood was only secondarily concerned about this, his interest being centred in Maisie and her safety; but as Everard argued, the bigger the job, the greater her danger.

"What is the next move, then?" asked Rookwood.

"We must wait and watch," replied Everard, with a satisfied smile.

"Wait!" echoed Rookwood. "And while we wait . . . ! My dear fellow, I must do something. Something must be done at once. Can't you suggest something?"

"Suggest something? Certainly. I can suggest heaps of things," replied Everard, smiling indulgently. He rose from the table and straddled across the hearthrug with his back to the fire, rubbing and patting the backs of his legs and making dips and bends like a step-dancer, to ease the set of his nether garments.

"Yes. I can suggest something." He yawned as he talked and made a complicated grimace in doing it. "Of course people like you can do things the police can't venture to attempt. We can't take chances. But if I were you, now, Rookwood, if I were you," here he yawned again and Rookwood nearly shrieked in his impatience; "if I were you, I would go and see this Peyton, or Pleydell. Go and see him as you did before. Go and see him and tell him that you know him to be an ex-convict living under an assumed name; and that you found Miss Peyton's clothes under the stairs; and so on, you know. And that if you are not satisfied of her safety you will have to take steps to satisfy yourself; and so on, you know. You can pitch it ever so strong, as long as you do not do it before witnesses. You can say anything you like to a man if there are no witnesses. Be sure you are alone with him. And I say; you had better keep a look-out in case he has a revolver. Now I must be toddling. Keep me informed, and so on, you know."

No advice could have been more to Rookwood's taste. He hated working underground, and liked facing things openly; and it seemed that Peyton could not possibly answer the accusations in any satisfactory way.

Mrs. Fenton hung about his room until he was able to exchange a few words with her. She was terribly upset when she heard that Fenton had taken a bag away.

"It is her dear dressing-bag, the lamb," she exclaimed. "It is missing, sir, and it must be that. It means that my husband knows all about this wicked business . . . "

She broke down.

"Yes, but, Mrs. Fenton, I think that makes it seem less mysterious," said Rookwood, comfortingly and sensibly. "If Fenton knows where she is, and has actually taken her dressing-bag to her, then she is safe and fairly well cared for. It is more reassuring than if the bag had been there with the other things."

"Yes, sir, but who is she with? What sort of people have they give the blessed lamb to? Nobody that is any good would help to keep her against her will, and they might keep her for all kinds of harm, dressing-bag and all. O my poor lamb, my poor dearie; may God above us keep her safe. I never thought to see such a day as this, never; no, I did not."

When Rookwood came back from his office that afternoon, he went straight to Pleydell's room. With his hat and stick in his hand, he apologized formally for intruding, and stood inside the door which he closed resolutely behind him. Pleydell, half risen from his huge lounge chair, with a forbidding frown on his generally pleasant face, waited to hear what was coming.

"I am sorry to reopen a difficult subject, Mr. Peyton," began Rookwood, "but I am afraid I really must trouble you to tell me where your daughter is."

Peyton looked at him insolently and laughed low. He dropped back comfortably into the big chair and did not trouble to answer. "Bluff is the only thing," he thought, swiftly; "either he knows or he doesn't."

"I do not think it will turn out to be a laughing matter," continued Rookwood. "It would be much less disagreeable if you would meet me fairly and tell me what I want to know."

He paused, and again Pleydell laughed a little and stretched himself luxuriously back, with his finger between the leaves of a magazine he had been reading.

"Do you not intend to tell me?"

"My dear chap," said Pleydell, in an amused tone, "why should I? I simply do not recognize your right to claim any information about my daughter's movements or whereabouts. There is, as no doubt you know, a thing called 'The Golden Rule.' "

"I know a better one," replied Rookwood, showing his teeth in a slight smile. "It is 'Do the Right.' It

happens to be the motto of our family. In this case, it would not be right if I did not insist on my point, in the light of the information I have put together since I was last in this room."

"Unless you give me the benefit of that information also," said Pleydell, "you cannot expect me to be as much impressed with it as you appear to be, if you are making it the excuse for this—intrusion into my daughter's affairs."

"I have every intention of sharing it with you," replied Rookwood, stepping to the table and resting his hand on it. "I came for that purpose—if you forced me to do it. I still think it would have been pleasanter if you had allowed me to take another course. The information is, that no telegram came for your daughter summoning her to her aunt's; that her clothes, supposed to be with her, were bundled behind the stair leading to the loft—a very remarkable place for anyone to choose for evening dresses and smart underwear; and that you are a man well known to the police, living here under a false name. I do not think you are a safe guardian for a young girl, and I do not think the police would think the circumstances devoid of suspicion."

There was a longish silence.

" 'Do the Right,' " quoted Pleydell, with much bitterness. "Is it a right or an honourable thing, do you think, Mr. Rookwood, to pry into a man's past and help to hound him down after he has risen clear of it by superhuman efforts—by superhuman efforts?" He rose to his feet, standing slim and straight. "After years of expiation, I find my wife dead and my daughter a stranger. This is the first time I have been able to live like a Christian for more than twenty years. And you think you will 'do the right' by assuming that once a criminal always a criminal and that my daughter—my only child—is part of my prey. I think, Mr. Rookwood,

that with all my faults, I am a better man than you."

For a moment Rookwood was shaken. He felt an unutterable cur. It seemed a horrible thing that he was doing.

It was the recollection of Mrs. Fenton's anguish that steeled his heart.

"I did not come here to talk ethics, Mr. Peyton, but to find out where your daughter is. Let me see her, and hear from her lips that she is well and in good hands, and I will respect your secret in every way that a man can do. I wish you no harm and would do you no harm. But I must have something beyond your word in regard to Miss Peyton."

"Will a note from her satisfy you?"

"No," sharply. "I do not know her writing."

There was another silence.

"Do you intend to ask my daughter to marry you?" asked Pleydell, suddenly.

Rookwood felt as if he had had a blow in the face.

"I had not thought of any such thing," he answered, his face colouring hotly.

"I thought not," sneered Pleydell. "The ex-convict's daughter would not be good enough for you, of course, with your family motto of 'Do the Right.' She is all very well for attentions when her father's back is turned, for establishing a secret intimacy with, for making her conspicuous and setting the lodging-house people talking; but nothing more serious, nothing honourable. And I am to be the medium through whom you prosecute your dishonourable purpose . . . ! God damn your soul, sir, what do you take me for, and my daughter? I send her out of this house to get her away from one libertine, and I am expected to make the way easy for another! Go to the police—and to hell—as soon as you like! Don't come to me."

Pleydell did it well. Not a word rang false.

Rookwood was sorely puzzled and looked it; but he clung to his sheet-anchor, Mrs. Fenton's unfeigned dread.

"I suppose the libertine you refer to is Lord John," he remarked. "I confess that with his reputation, it puzzled me that you should allow a young girl to be alone with him in his private rooms every day and late at night. It is hardly the part that so scrupulously careful a parent would be expected to play: and—forgive my mentioning this—has helped to confirm me in the belief that you are no fit guardian for her."

"Well now," fired Pleydell, wheeling on him; "will you marry her, if I bring her back here?"

"How can I say such a thing without knowing whether she wants to marry me?" cried Rookwood, his head reeling at the suggestion.

"You took good care to set that beyond doubt," retorted Pleydell, with again a great show of bitterness. "You cannot pretend not to know her state of mind —her feeling about you."

Rookwood's head swam.

If Maisie came back, it would be quite easy to pretend to be engaged. . . . He could tell her how it all came about; and then they could "break it off" when convenient. The prospect was an alluring one; it had a fascination that he was powerless to resist. And if by any chance this was true—this that this man was suggesting—that Maisie cared for him . . .

"Very well, Mr. Peyton. Bring Miss Peyton back here to-morrow, and I will have our engagement announced. Is that a bargain?"

"We can consider it so," answered Pleydell, coldly. "May I now consider this unsought interview at an end?"

Rookwood bowed and turned to the door.

"Allow me," exclaimed Pleydell, with exaggerated courtesy but not moving a step; and Rookwood let him-

self out. Pleydell did not make the mistake of offering to shake hands or of making any overtures of friendship. When the door closed behind the unwelcome visitor, he sank back into the big chair and, staring at the fire, tried to work out the problem that faced him.

Rookwood, on the other side of the door, stood as a man stunned; and then gaining his room, flung himself into a chair at the table and buried his face in his arms.

Maisie had been waited on at breakfast by the strange old man, who had growled curses between his teeth all the time he was in her room and reduced her to a state of nerves of which she was thoroughly ashamed. There were a good many other things of which she was ashamed also. The foolish attraction, the searching after sensation, that had induced her to throw in her lot with her criminal father, and the weakness that had allowed him to take possession of her even after his plain statement that he was far from penitent for the past; she was ashamed of these, and of the sentimentality that had prevailed over common sense, when she had allowed her foolish aunt to detract her from the pursuit of employment into the premature pursuit of her parent.

"I always know the right thing to do," moaned Maisie to herself, "but I have not the grit to do it at the right time. I ought to have left my mother after Mr. Torrance's death; I ought to have left my father the day after I found him in Lord Johnny's room. I always procrastinate; and in that way I have practically let myself become the associate of criminals. If it were all told, I should be considered almost as bad as them."

The point Maisie found hardest to come to conclusions about was, ought she have allowed her mother and the Seftons to be shown up over the Torrance case; and ought she to denounce her father? Every fibre in her

shrank from accepting that as a duty; yet, perhaps, for all that it was more of a duty than the observance of the filial tie that both her parents had held so lightly. But to help brand her mother as a swindler, and to help send her father back to penal servitude—it could not be a duty that would earn a blessing. Jim Sefton had said no good could ever come of it.

Her thoughts wandered away to Jim Sefton. His tender kisses; his passionate kisses; his arms, that held her so fondly—how dear he had seemed, and how strange it all seemed now! Maisie frowned over it and yet there were tears in her eyes. It seemed a far-away, unreal romance; and romance, perhaps, was nearer than that, less formidable, less elusive, younger . . . handsomer.

Anthony Rookwood's hand had lain in her arm, when they were coming out of the theatre through the crowd; had lain there so warmly, so closely; there must have been a meaning in it. She would like him to make love to her, and wondered how he would do it. She had an idea he would be a little shy. It would be splendid to be loved by someone so honest and true, so strong and steadfast, so brave and—yes, so handsome. How blue those eyes of his were; as blue as the sky on one of those still, hot days. A true real blue, not blue-grey, or greeny. . . .

Maisie was not in love with Rookwood, but girlishly pleased at the idea that he was attracted by her. He was such a creditable person to be seen with, and he was such a very interesting talker. If only she had him here to enliven the loneliness, how pleasantly the time would pass. And then the anxiety about her position attacked her again, and she wondered what had become of the Boss and Mrs. Fenton.

A horrible idea assaulted her brain. Had her father murdered the Boss . . . ?

The thought made her feel sick. Wretchedly anxious,

and faint with the foul air and want of exercise, she spent a horrible night and woke with an aching head and a heavy heart.

The day dragged slowly on and seemed never-ending. She hardly lifted her eyes, that evening, when the door opened to admit, as she thought, her offensive attendant. As he entered and shut the door behind him she moved round in her chair to turn her shoulder on him.

"May I talk to you, Miss Pleydell?" asked the Boss.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SPIDER'S WEB

THE inquiry into the case of Ernest Glanville and the theft of the Dockyard plans was remanded, at the request of the police, the object being to endeavour to lay hands on the person or persons who had posted the registered letter. Lord Johnny fumed and fretted and fussed, and made up his mind every night to go down and see his godson; and every morning, in sheer cowardice, made up his mind that he would not. The poor lad found himself gradually deserted by everyone except his pathetic little sweetheart, who tried so hard to "be brave" and failed so signally every time she saw him. The men in the police force and at the local gaol came to look upon them as two poor injured innocents, and many were the little acts of thoughtful kindness and delicacy that were offered to them by these warm-hearted sympathizers.

Lord Johnny was not without a share of agitations and distressing preoccupations on his own account during these days. He spent much time doging backwards and forwards from the big chair to the window, and bolting into his bedroom on various false alarms when he heard anyone coming unexpectedly up the stairs. He reconnoitered with vigilance before leaving the house, making for the cab-rank and driving off with all possible speed as soon as he got outside the door. Nevertheless he could not in the nature of things hope to escape the meeting which the angry and anxious Carrington was determined to achieve; and on returning home one fateful evening was informed by a deprecating and apologetic Fenton

that there was a gentleman upstairs who was going to wait till he came.

Carrington's agitation was so great he did not notice the even greater nervousness of Lord Johnny.

"Look here," he began, huskily and weakly. "What about it?"

"What about what?" parried Lord Johnny, returning to the door.

He bawled for Fenton and then rang the bell as well, and ordered drinks. Carrington nearly shrieked as Fenton leisurely moved about, helping Lord Johnny off with his coat, pouring out the whiskies and soda, making up the fire, settling the blinds and the curtains, tidying the table, before he went out and shut the door.

"About that plan"; Carrington's voice went into a squeak that was almost a falsetto. "Did that boy get at it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," retorted Lord Johnny.

"Oh, rot, Delane. You know as well as I do. It is all very well your wanting to screen him, but it is a damn sight too serious for that. It is a national business, not a personal one any longer. Did he or did he not know it was here?"

"Not unless you told him yourself," replied Lord Johnny, as rudely as he could.

"Don't be more of an ass than you can help," rejoined the other, more rudely still. "He must have seen it here and either taken it or copied it. It had a pencilled note on the margin——"

"In your handwriting," interrupted Lord Johnny.

"It is perfectly damnable," protested Carrington, in an angry squeak, "that you should have allowed it. Was it in that desk? All open like that? Anyone could have got it. Of course he got it. It is ruin for me. Why

don't you say something? It is all your fault, and at least you might say what you mean to do."

"What the deuce *can* I do?" asked Lord Johnny, also angry and helpless. "The boy never took it. It is impossible."

"Then where is it?" with a faint ray of hope which speedily clouded over at sight of Lord Johnny's face. "If you have got it safe, give it me back. If you haven't, you would not have run off in such a hurry when I got you at the Club. I knew then, I was certain. Is it really gone? Even if he had made a copy, so that I could put the original back, it would not have been so bad. What are you going to do about it?"

"Look here," said the goaded politician, desperate with fright and annoyance, "what is the use of going on like that? I *can't* do anything. What do you suppose I can do? I am certain the boy never . . ."

"What is the use of saying that? If he didn't take it, who did?"

Lord Johnny gave up pretending that he could produce the thing and shrugged his shoulders. He helped himself to an enormous tot of whisky.

"He is a blasted young hound," went on Carrington, lashing himself into a rage. "If he could steal the thing from you here, he could just as much steal it from Burleigh's safe, or from anyone who trusted him. There is no reason anyone should think he got it anyhow else, for that matter . . . He could easily have got at the keys, and everyone knew about the thing . . ."

He helped himself to whisky—a bigger tot than Lord Johnny's. Under its soothing influence they talked themselves into some kind of quiescence, Lord Johnny refusing to admit that he believed the boy took the plan, but prepared to admit that if he did, he could just as well have taken it from his chief's safe as from his godfather's desk.

There was no concerted plan, no scheme put into words, no bond made or sworn. But they parted with an understanding, of which each was deeply ashamed and in which each yet found comfort and relief, that it would be as well to let it be believed that the plan had been stolen from its proper place in Admiral Burleigh's safe, before or after the cutting open of Sir Arthur Melton's safe where the "key" of the design was secured; and not from the desk of Lord Johnny Delane, where it had no business at all to be, and where it would not have been had not Carrington fancied that the whole notion was pirated from an invention of his father-in-law's, Captain Blessington, and sent it to Lord Johnny with a request that he would get the Blessington design and compare the two.

That the Blessington design never could be found, and that Captain Blessington did not recognize the description and proved unable to give a clear idea of what had been the special feature of his own invention, being senile and semi-paralysed and in charge of a trained nurse who would not allow him to talk for more than fifteen minutes on end, had not satisfied Lord Johnny that there was not a scandal to unearth if only he could get hold of it. So he kept the plan in his room and showed it to Admiral Bayley; worse luck. Bitterly he now regretted having meddled, and scathingly he anathematized Carrington and his father-in-law and their blithering idiocy; consigning them to bottomless depths of perdition, as he walked restlessly up and down his unquiet apartment, in blasphemies far too picturesque for reproduction.

And it all came out so suddenly and so unexpectedly; the "clue" that was to be the master-key of the mystery being nothing less than the spider-web veil that Maisie had thought herself so clever to use and to burn afterwards! It was the burning did it.

The Boss's interview with Maisie had been brief and to the point.

"Your father is coming round, Miss Pleydell," he said curtly; "and we think it will be best if you get home quietly as soon as possible. If you simply go back and take up your ordinary life and say nothing, he will say nothing either."

"I have not the least intention of going back to live with my father," said Maisie, indignantly. "After all that has happened, and an innocent man accused . . . " She broke off, not knowing how far she might go.

"He is not an innocent man," answered the Boss. "Put *that* out of your mind, if you have got it in. He is your father's partner and accomplice."

Maisie stared with wide eyes; and at last exclaimed, "Oh-h-h!" And then,

"I see!"

"It is this way," went on the Boss. "If he is convicted —it may be very difficult to convict him now that the plans have been returned—he will not get a heavy sentence on account of his youth. If your father is mixed up in it, as an old offender he will get a sentence that will finish him. Now, are you going to do what your father says?"

"Stay with him? Certainly not. I shall go and get work."

"Your father's terms are——"

"I don't care what his terms are, I will not make terms with criminals."

"If you don't accept them . . . "

"Well, what?"

"Glanville will accuse you of the theft."

Thus was Maisie muzzled; and it was a badly frightened daughter that Pleydell received back that night. He made no remark that could be considered unkind; he

put his arm round her and kissed her; but she was more afraid of him than she had ever believed she could be of anyone in the world.

After supper he laid down his commands.

"That fellow Rookwood wants to marry you," he remarked; "and I have consented. Until you are his wife, you will hold your tongue about this affair. After you are married tell him what you like; he won't want a father-in-law in gaol. You tell him, and tell Mrs. Fenton, that you were at Brighton with the Chetwyndes; or better still, hold your tongue altogether.

"The police are looking for the woman who posted the plans. That woman was Lord John's private secretary. Glanville was here one week-end after you were employed; and you were the associate of criminals in Paris. I hope you see where you stand. Your disappearance—you bolted, and pretended to take your clothes; and the Boss found you. He knows all the criminal haunts . . . Do you see?"

Maisie saw; and vowed to be revenged on her father. She had enough of his blood in her veins to be dangerous.

She had another grudge to add to it.

Mrs. Fenton had been carefully coached by her husband, who had explained to her the use that had been made of her name to keep Miss Maisie quiet. He carefully concealed Mr. Dick's connivance at his daughter's kidnapping, and represented himself and the Boss as a pair of warm-hearted friends who had shielded a helpless girl against her father's wrath.

"Miss Maisie, she had written a letter that made him properly angry," explained Fenton. "Mr. Dick don't want everyone that ever knew him to know where he is and what name he goes by; and he was fairly dancing mad."

This ingenious explanation half convinced Mrs. Fenton, and she gave a hesitating confirmation of the things

that had been said in her name. It was Mr. Dick's watchful eye that had prevented her coming to her lamb. In private she moaned over the way she was deceiving her lamb.

Her lamb did not tell her what constituted the worst horror of her incarceration. She kept that in her heart, storing it up at compound interest against her father. If Mrs. Fenton had had any inkling of it, it is doubtful if all the cunning of Fenton could have kept her from open speech.

When the Boss brought Maisie out of the horrible room in which she had spent such days and nights, he had taken her to the inner apartment at the Vaults and made her drink a stiff tot of whisky. Her white face gave him concern.

"You should have had it more dainty-like," he said clumsily, as he watched her returning colour, "if I could have managed it. There's a little place of mine in the country——" He broke off.

There was in his voice that tell-tale quality that Maisie dreaded. And he had been taking drink.

"Your father is fixing up a wedding for you," he went on, hoarsely. "If you don't like it—if the fellow isn't to your taste——" again he broke off.

"I'm damned if I know why I let you go," he broke out, savagely. His coarse hands gripped her wrists and hurt her with their hardness. "You have brought us nothing but trouble and bad luck, for all we tried to do our best for you. Your father went soft about you—I went soft about you—old hands like us! And you sold us. First decent thing we had done for years, and you made us sorry for it. I'm going to have something for my trouble before I let you go."

Maisie was in no state to pit her strength against his, after her days and nights in the foul den she had left. He kissed her as he would, and she was helpless. The

smell of him, the feel of his face and hands—she felt as if she would never be rid of them again.

She kept it to herself, in a horror of shame, brooding over it and hating her father, who had let this hideous thing loose upon her. She understood that the Boss, who had posed as her friend, was one of her father's partners. She did not know where the chain of partnership reached to, possibly even to Mrs. Fenton, who admitted that she had known where Maisie was. So she told Mrs. Fenton as little as she could, and wounded the kind heart sorely.

Maisie had no notion how close the police hunt had come, nor how much her absence had stimulated it, during those days in Mauleverer Street. She did not anticipate much danger from that quarter; it was the combination of her father and Glanville that she feared. Glanville she had never seen; but in her mind he figured cold, sinister, blue-eyed and pale like her father, and coarse like the Boss—a truly remarkable caricature of villainy.

Of the arranged marriage with Rookwood she thought with anxiety, wondering how much he knew or guessed.

At this particular juncture, the papers were very emphatic about the "clue" the police were supposed to have. "The police have a clue" was published and repeated in a hundred organs of enlightened opinion. The police themselves hardly called it that; but they indubitably had a bit of information, which they discreetly kept from the public and the Press. It was, that the employee at the Westbourne Grove post-office—a woman—who had taken the registered letter over the counter, had deposed that the lady who had registered the letter wore a spider's web veil. Spider's web veils were the fashionable affectation of the moment, and ladies with spidery veils were being followed in all directions. There were a great many to follow. This bit of information was shared by the Portsmouth police and New Scotland Yard.

On the evening that Maisie was expected back, Everard

came to see Rookwood. The latter had not long returned from the bank, and was in a state of idiotic excitement. He was longing for news of Maisie's arrival, and very shy of breaking to Everard the utterly insane bargain into which he had entered. His face burned when he thought of his "engagement"; because he was going to tell Maisie it was merely arranged in order to get her back—and knew in his heart he would move heaven and earth to make it a real and binding engagement.

The two men chatted desultorily, and smoked; and Mrs. Fenton was heard moving in the bedroom. Rookwood called her in.

"Do you know what time Miss Peyton returns?" he asked, striving to make his voice sound natural. "I spoke to Mr. Peyton last night, and he said she would be back to-day. I had no opportunity to tell you before."

"The dear lamb!" burst forth Mrs. Fenton.

For a moment Rookwood feared she would embrace him, in her overwhelming exuberance of joy.

"The dear lamb! Coming back this very day-as-ever-is, and no one to tell me! Only to think of that! And she coming back to-night, and me never to know and not to have her dear room ready! And all her pretty things, so messed about, bundled in that dirty messy hole, which I meant to iron them out. All her pretty things, sir," turning, in politeness as well as excitement, to Everard, not to leave him out of so interesting a conversation; "all her pretty things, so dainty-like-as-they-are-being-from-Paris-where-they-do-have-things-lovely-I-must-say ——" the good woman was getting breathless with her subject and speeded-up her sentences recklessly—"and there they all are and Mr. Anthony he pull them out all scrunched up, her lovely charmoose gown, and her black silk blouse and her mauve creep de chine, and her Spanish lace fall and her evening gloves and everything. Everything, sir, if you'll believe me, in that dirty stair-

hole. All her pretty little things; everything excep' her spider's web. All scrumpled up; all excep' her spider's web, but perhaps-she-have-that-on-as-no-one-see-her-go-out."

"The what?" shouted Everard, now thoroughly roused.

"Her spider's web fall; her veil, she call it, sir. All with spider's web-like, embroidered on the fall. Very fashionable, it were, but I never like it, as I say to her, it hide too much of your pretty face. It was not there, nor yet in her drawer, nor nowhere; but of course it might be took away in the other bag, and all her pretty silk underwear . . ."

The good dame's loquacity ran out presently, and she hurried away to get her lamb's room warmed and lighted.

Rookwood smiled indulgently, with the need upon him to talk of Maisie or hear her talked about.

"Have you ever seen Miss Peyton in this veil?" asked Everard, forgetting, in this new excitement, that he wanted to hear about the interview with Peyton.

"Can't say I have," replied Rookwood, moving restlessly about, and fidgetting with tobacco, pipe, matches, ash-tray, and other accessories to the smoking habit, with a view to concealing his growing embarrassment at the revelation he would soon have to make. "I have seen her in black, and in black and white, and in mauve; a mauvy thing with a close hat—quite a little hat, sort of thing they call a toque—and in evening dress with a black scarf; but I don't remember a veil. I wouldn't have forgotten . . . I shouldn't have forgotten . . ."

He wandered on rather dreamily, and Everard looked at him sharply.

"She *has* such a veil, though. The old woman said so. I want you to stir her up, Rooks, see, and make her search everywhere for that veil. And if Miss Peyton comes back in it—by-the-bye, how the devil did you manage it? Did you find out why she disappeared? I'm

blest if the whole thing isn't as fishy as it can be! When she comes back, get the old woman to ask her what became of the veil. See?"

"Why?" asked Rookwood, roused to surprise.

"Because a spider's web veil is an important clue in the Portsmouth case. We have kept this to ourselves—of course it is quite safe with you—you must not let it go any further. The girl, or woman, who registered the letter to Sir Arthur wore a veil like that. The post-office girl who registered the letter noticed it particularly."

Rookwood stared darkly at the fire. Everard altogether failed to note his expression.

"I would not be a bit surprised if the whole thing hangs together," he went on. "What kind of a girl is she? Is she the mercenary kind on the look-out for the main chance, or the quiet kind that runs deep, or the rowdy sort? Or is she just the ordinary fool that can be made use of?"

"She is going to be my wife," said Rookwood, hoarsely.

"Good God!" ejaculated Everard.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAUGHT IN THE WEB

In bed that night, Maisie turned over the events of the last few days. It seemed plain to her that there had been a criminal conspiracy on a big scale and that a good many people were in it. Her father and Fenton, the Boss and Mr. Glanville; and there must be others too, the ones who bought the stolen information—foreigners, they would be—German or Russian. And how about Lord Johnny? Was his apparent imbecility really deep-laid cunning and did he collect all those grievance-mongers round him merely to make money out of their confiding folly? That would be quite possible, thought Maisie, who by this time had a poor opinion of politicians.

The question no longer was, how should she extricate young Glanville, but how should she extricate herself from the tangle in which she was caught? She was to be denounced as Glanville's accomplice, if anything went wrong, or went worse, through her; and for the life of her she could not tell how she could disprove the accusation. She had once heard Jim Sefton say, in a matter of the same kind, "The great thing is, to get in first. Tell your own story first," and she longed to tell her story to someone who would believe it and who would help her to vindicate her position.

Rookwood, whom her father told her she was to marry, had not been near her. The evening had passed without his calling, or sending her a message. She had hoped he would come, although rather embarrassed at the prospect; but had finally gone to bed without seeing him.

If only she could tell him the story she was sure he would help; but she had promised her father to be silent. A promise under threat, she had been told, did not count; but Miss Stutchberry had always held that to be a base creed. She had taught, "Do not promise; face any danger rather than make a promise with the intention of breaking it. That is a knave's dodge." Maisie hated the thought and felt she would be disgraced in Rookwood's eyes as well as her own if she were such a coward as that. Yet she could not marry him while he was in ignorance of the coil of crime laid round her. She liked the idea of being his wife, for she felt that at least she would be safe; but gradually she came to the conclusion that there must be no more cowardice and no more giving in to circumstances. She must do what was right.

"It cannot be right to send my father to gaol," she thought, "even if he deserves it as much as this Glanville; but it would be shameful to marry Mr. Rookwood without his knowing of all this. What I must do is simply to refuse to listen to any talk of marrying him, and just take the consequences. I have let myself be persuaded into doing wrong before; I must not let myself be bullied into it now."

Her mind revolved all manner of schemes for escape. All seemed pretty hopeless; for, if Lord Johnny were in the conspiracy too, she obviously need not ask him for a reference to help her get another position. Just as she was dozing off, however, she remembered Jim Sefton's strange introduction to her old schoolmistress; and she came to a sudden resolution to find her way back if possible to the High-class Educational Establishment. They would find her work.

Next day, at tea-time, Rookwood came in, looking ill at ease. Pleydell, after a few conventional sentences,

left the room. Rookwood sat in silence for a space, and Maisie felt horribly uncomfortable.

"Has your father told you anything of what it is I want to say to you?" asked Rookwood, hoarsely and hesitatingly. Maisie was struck by his curious manner.

"I think so," she answered shyly.

"I want you to be my wife," he continued, jerkily. "I could make you comfortable . . . I would try to make you happy . . . Do you think you could be happy . . . with me?"

Maisie could not believe it was only shyness that made him so nervous. What could be the matter with him, she wondered.

"I am afraid I cannot marry you, Mr. Rookwood," she answered, in a low voice. "I do not know what you and my father have said or thought; but I cannot, I could not do a thing like that. You would not ask me, if you knew."

"If I knew what?" asked Rookwood.

"If you knew what I know—something I cannot tell you," said Maisie, picking up her courage. "I would like to tell you; I want to tell you very much—Oh, I would like to tell you and get your help and advice! But I cannot, because I have given my word. And I cannot marry you without your knowing. It would be wrong."

Rookwood believed her to be referring to her father's criminal record. His heart swelled with tenderness. Maisie had risen and was leaning against the mantelpiece with drooped head; he went to her and took her hands, holding them against his breast.

"Dear, do you care the least little bit for me? Never mind anything else; we will talk of that afterwards. Do you care anything for me? Would you marry me if there were nothing?"

The strong hands that gripped hers were so warm and comforting. Maisie glanced at the face belonging to

them and met a passionately tender gaze which made her drop her eyes again and colour scarlet.

"I don't know," she faltered. "I never thought about it. But it is no use, Mr. Rookwood——"

"Think about it now, then. Tell me if you could care for me, if you could let me love you, if you could bear to live with me, to be close to me . . ." He had her in his arms, with his lips in her billowing hair.

Maisie clung to him in a sort of passion. He seemed her one chance of safety; and safety and clean living were the only things to care about. A shelter from the evil ways she was so sick of; must she renounce it? It was too hard.

He turned her face to his, hurting her with his violence. The strength of his feeling for the girl, which he had hardly guessed before, overcame him now. He kissed her, in tense silence; and she remembered Jim Sefton's kisses and wondered if this man cared or only shammed. A desperate doubt seized her. Had he forgone the kisses and only held her and entreated her, she would have gone on trusting him.

"Will you marry me, Maisie, and let me keep you safe?"

She wondered why he said that, and her doubt deepened. He was thinking of Everard's confidence, she of the secret she might not tell him. Suddenly she drew herself from his arms.

"I cannot marry you," she cried. "There is a good reason which I cannot tell you; but there it is. I don't care what my father says! It is too dishonourable."

"And if I were to tell you that I know the reason and do not mind . . . that I fixed it up with your father?"

Maisie's suspicions intensified. She looked at him with a horrified face.

"Are you in it too?" she said. "How much do you know?"

"My dear, my dear, I know it all. The mess your father got himself into and your being mixed up with that old swine upstairs and getting you away—I forced his hand and made him bring you back—and if only you will marry me, it will all be as if it had never been, not a word of it need you ever hear again. Oh, how I wish I could say what I want; dear one, nothing matters if only you can care for me a little and let me love you and keep you safe."

Now it will be plain that Rookwood only referred to her father's past, and was perturbed at the prospect of Everard's making trouble for her in the present; but to Maisie, with her own trouble and her unhappy experience and her suspicion already alight, every word he said make it plainer to her that he was in the business too, and had intervened between her and her father merely to obtain possession of her for himself through the hold they all had on her. She saw he was in love with her; she knew what things men will do for the possession of a woman. She felt that her last hope had failed.

"What is the use of being honest!" she thought in bitter despair. Here was her father, and Fenton, and Lord Johnny, and this Rookwood, all respected, prosperous, popular, received into society and exclusive clubs and government circles, and all as wicked and as vicious as possible. *Much* more really wicked than her mother's friends. What did it matter!

She thought she understood, now, what had puzzled her a little before—why her father wanted her to marry this man. It was, of course, only a pretence that Rookwood did not know and was not to be told; it was a way of making the prospect of marrying him more attractive to her, so that she should give no trouble. The profits were to be kept in the family; and it was easier

and safer to keep her quiet that way than to do her any injury.

Well, she would marry him. What did it matter?

"Very well, then, I'll marry you," she said, in a hard, defiant tone of voice.

Rookwood looked a little surprised and nonplussed; but was too carried away with excitement to be critical. When Pleydell returned, and congratulated them in his cynical fashion, he invited father and daughter to spend the evening out with him, and the *tête-à-tête* came to an end.

Maisie went about in a maze of misery. There was no one to trust, no hope of escape. If she ran away, her father would set the police on her track in self-defence; if she stayed, she would be involved in more crime. The prospect of marrying Rookwood, in the new light of his participation in crime, was loathsome; the only alternative was to go to the police. Sooner or later, this criminal gang would be sure to fall into the hands of justice; and there did not seem any sufficient reason why she should let them drag her down with them. It was surely the most sensible thing, to tell the truth to the right authorities and let justice be done. One wretched day followed another, of indecision and doubt, and misgiving; the resolution come to over-night appearing all wrong when viewed by morning light. And all the time Everard was following up his clue relentlessly.

Everard had apologized profusely to Rookwood, and then shifted the subject entirely from the veil and the Portsmouth case. Rookwood was not so simple as to be hoodwinked, and remained seriously disturbed at the suggestion thrown out; but no more was said. Everard then set to work to find out, through Sergeant Ferryman, who was the charwoman who worked for Mrs. Fenton; and she was put on to the delicate task of finding out

about the veil. It turned out to be quite a simple matter, for Mrs. Fenton had asked Maisie where the missing article was and had been told, lightly, that she had lost it somewhere, after taking it off one day. It did not matter, she said, as she could not see through it.

When Mrs. Haslam said, with an appearance of great interest in Miss Peyton, "Hasn't the young lady got one of them cobweb veils, as look so smart and all the fashionable ladies wear them?" Mrs. Fenton had answered, "She did have one, but lost it out one day and can't remember where." A subsequent clever search through Maisie's room revealed no trace of such an article; and Mrs. Haslam duly reported to Sergeant Ferryman, who reported to Everard that there was no such article to be found. Everard's suspicions were thereupon deepened, and he was convinced that the veil had been destroyed; but he was not much nearer proving the identity of the lady who registered the letter. Then he boldly advertised for information.

Glanville had been twice before the magistrates and twice remanded. No further evidence of any value had been unearthed, and the police were plainly at fault. Then a cloak-room attendant came forward with a statement in answer to the Scotland Yard advertisement.

On a date which coincided with the posting of the letter—the woman remembered it because it was the day her daughter's baby had cut its first tooth and that was the same day as her, the grandmother's, wedding-day—a lady had arrived in a spidery veil, and had gone away without it. Had noticed her because her face had such splotches of red colour; and her daughter, who was there with the toothy baby, had remarked on it and wondered if it were real. And they had both said she would have done better to keep her veil on, than go about with a face that made people stare.

A pretty-looking young lady? Oh, yes, and smart. A

very ladylike young person; only her face looked as if it had been *smacked,* the colour were that *high!*

Under the chaperonage of Sergeant Ferryman, the two women identified Maisie going in and out of No. 29. The identification was assisted by her wearing the same dress that she had worn with the spidery veil.

The next step was, for Everard to get an interview with Maisie. He wanted to see some evidence of the remarkable colour that made her look as if her face had been "smacked." So he called on Rookwood one evening, just when he knew he would not have quite finished dinner. That he was thoroughly unwelcome, he knew quite well. He was shrewd enough in some ways, if primitive in others. He guessed pretty accurately that Rookwood had not forgotten anything that Everard had said, and that he would not be very anxious to introduce his fiancée to the Assistant Commissioner.

Rookwood's frame of mind was unenviable, and he was suffering acutely. He realized that the tearing passion for this young girl whom he hardly knew, which was playing havoc with his moral and physical fibres, was quite possibly an evanescent thing, and that it was in good truth and solid fact a most dangerous and complicated business upon which he was embarking. Against the bright hair and soft eyes—yes, and the unresponsive nature—of his love, there was a heavy balance of risk and grave objection. A tarnished name and an ex-convict for a father; a mother whom she tried not to mention, a past mixed up with God knew what of vice and debauchery and even crime; it was an alliance from which the county blood and the honest banking traditions alike shrank in unutterable distaste. The touch of the girl's beautiful flexible hands made the blood race hotly in Rookwood's veins, made him lose control of himself as he had never thought to do; but the sinister likeness of those exquisite hands to the hands of the cold-blooded,

polished rascal who was her father, made him sick with disgust. This marriage, if he carried it out, was one that might drag him down to depths unplumbed; it could never under the most hopeful circumstances be anything but a handicap. But every instinct of chivalry, and those deep springs of sentiment and romance of which none save Anthony Rookwood himself could have told, urged him to hold fast and be true to his love, and to shield her from Everard's pursuit. The more she were pressed, the closer he would hold. He felt definitely hostile to Everard; but of his uncle the bank manager, and how he would view this unnatural alliance, he hardly dared allow himself to think at all.

Everard ignored the coldness of his reception, and sat chatting desultorily, and cracking and munching nuts. He discoursed of one or two friends, of the news of the day, of an amazing marriage which had taken away the breath of even the smartest and fastest Society. And then as if by an easy association of ideas, he asked:

"And what about your affair, Rooks? Are you to be married soon?"

"I hope so," answered Rookwood, soberly. "As soon as things can be fixed up."

"It is the best thing for one to do, when all is said and done," commented Everard. "I have put it off so long I have not the pluck to alter my ways now; but I wish to heaven I had done it ten years ago. Do you know the Galloways, Rooks?"

"No."

"Well, if you did, you would know what I mean. Mrs. Galloway—I was awfully gone on her, and so on. Of course, she preferred Galloway; I don't mean to suggest that I had the ghost of a chance; but instead of finding someone else, I brooded and sulked over it; and now the time has gone. I go to the Galloways sometimes. It is one of those places—the real home atmosphere,

and so on; you know. She looks like a saint, with those nice kiddies round her, and so well brought up. Galloway is fearfully proud of them, and of her. One sees what one has missed. Makes one sick of bachelor ways, no matter how much one loves one's freedom, and so on."

Everard blew clouds of smoke, and Rookwood nodded sagely.

"Get it good, and it's the best of all, by long chalks," Everard continued, "in spite of the ormolu clocks and the apostle tea-spoons and the table-napkin rings they load you up with. What shall I give you, old chap?"

"Oh good gracious!" laughed Rookwood, "what a thing to ask me! I haven't thought about it. Give me time!"

"I knew some people," began Everard, leaning back and crossing his legs, "they were not wealthy, but well born, and had Lofty Connections. And the eldest son, godson of the Loftiest Connection, got married to a nobody-in-particular, and the Lofty Connection asked whether he would like for a wedding present 'an ornament for your wife or something useful for the house.' The ornament-for-your-wife was sorely tempting to the lady; but utilitarianism prevailed and they plumped for something-useful-for-the-house. So he sent them a loving-cup!"

"How curst," laughed Rookwood. "Don't give us one. We would sooner have a beer-jug."

"I shall have to consult Miss Peyton," said Everard; "she is sure to have more ideas than you on the subject. When can I make her acquaintance, Rooks? I haven't even seen her yet. You must introduce me."

Rookwood struggled to conceal his disinclination to make any such promise. He did not want Maisie or her father to meet this man. It seemed almost indecent. But while he was fencing with Everard and holding him off,

there came a knock at the door; and Maisie herself stood in the doorway. Both men rose.

"Father says, won't you come in for a talk, Mr. Rookwood."

"Thanks ever so much . . . er . . . Just tell your father, will you, not to-night. I have a friend here. Miss Peyton; Captain Everard."

Everard bowed. "Don't let me prevent . . ." he began, looking from one to the other.

"Perhaps Captain Everard would give us the pleasure of his company, too?" said Maisie, seeing that the stranger plainly wanted an invitation. Her manner was not very warm; but Everard accepted the suggestion with profuse thanks, and all three repaired to the back room.

Pleydell's brow darkened when he saw Everard, and for a moment he looked vilely wicked. Then he put a good face on it, and after a while the four sat down to a rubber of bridge.

Everard conversed easily and interestingly when he chose, and for some time he kept to safe topics; but after a while he led the conversation to the Portsmouth affair.

"Did you ever meet Glanville, Miss Peyton?" he asked. "He was old Lord John's godson or something, wasn't he?"

"I believe so," answered Maisie.

"I wish I could find out who sent back the plans," continued Everard, staring full at Maisie. "A young woman with bright hair and a very high colour, smartly dressed and with a peculiar veil which she took off in a cloakroom . . ." The last, of course, was pure assumption; but the shot got home.

Maisie's face stained itself with that vivid flood of scarlet which mounted to her fair skin in any moment of emotion, and made her face look, as the cloak-room

attendant had said, as if she had been smacked. The skin itself was so smooth and transparent that the brilliancy, though appearing unreal and artificial, was yet exquisitely delicate. Everard stared, fascinated.

Beyond a doubt, this was the young lady of the cloak-room. Was she also the young lady of the post-office?

"She wore a spider's web veil," continued Everard. "We are searching for that veil."

He stared hard at her, unrelenting. The scarlet tide invaded neck and brow and ears. Pleydell's eyes travelled rapidly from one to the other. He had not the password, but he knew Everard was following up the trail and felt anxious. He was furious with Rookwood for bringing him into their company; but that was a matter about which he would not venture to protest. Honest folk could keep company with police-commissioners undisturbed.

Maisie understood that she was in great danger; and she had a flash of intuition, after intercepting her father's glance, which told her she was in almost as great danger from him as from the law. It suited him well to hold a threat over her until he had muzzled her effectually and handed her over to a husband whose respectability would guarantee her silence; but the threat would be reduced to impotence if the authorities got at her first, from another direction. If Pleydell thought his daughter were likely to be arrested independently of any action of his, he would believe that she would give him away in self-defence; and he would be capable of having her made away with . . . capable of anything.

She remembered how he had once said, in regard to an accidental discharge of a revolver which had killed a man, "Hm-m-m! Wonder what inconvenient secret that dead man could have let out!" And she could almost picture her father hanging in distracted grief over her dead body, calling in the household, and spinning a

heartbreaking tale about her helping him clean a revolver which he did not know was loaded . . . or some similar story. She was terribly afraid to be left alone with him.

Maisie was sure that Everard suspected her; indeed, she knew that her vivid blushes were calculated to make him do so. It was a question of how long it would take him to complete the chain of evidence, and how much her father guessed of the position.

She did not know what to think about Rookwood. Had he brought this Scotland Yard man in on them in pure innocence and simplicity, or was he only pretending love and was he really helping justice? The latter was an awful thought and brought flaming blushes all over her. Or was Everard, perhaps, "crook" too, and standing in for his share? That was the most likely.

But she could not trust to possibilities. She was too much afraid of her father. Some decision must be come to without delay; she dared not spend another day—no, nor even the rest of the evening, alone with him. His malignant face was an incarnate threat. She had rather do penal servitude than live under the shadow of his wickedness.

"I promised I would not tell," she repeated to herself, in desperation. "What in the world can I do!"

When Everard got up to go, she made up her mind.

"Will you come back here when you have seen Captain Everard off?" she asked Rookwood; and surprised and disturbed, he promised that he would return.

In his room, helping Everard on with his coat, he said, deliberately:

"I think you are a coward and cad, unfit to associate with decent people. What do you mean by making use of my private friendship to set a trap for my fiancée? You damned cad. Get out of here."

"My dear chap," returned Everard, unmoved, "that is

not a family for you to marry into. Some day you will be jolly grateful to me."

"Clear out," said Rookwood, in a voice trembling with rage; "and sharp. Don't show your face here again."

"Good-bye, old man; awfully sorry," chirped Everard; and Rookwood slammed the door after him.

Settling his collar with his finger—for a moment it had seemed so tight as to be choking him—he returned slowly to Pleydell's room.

Maisie was standing before the fire, her lips set, her eyes shining. The scarlet dye on her cheeks was unreally lovely. Pleydell stood the other side of the table; both were plainly roused and at tension.

Rookwood walked round to Maisie's side.

"Do you want me, my dear?" he asked, in his deep, tender voice.

"Yes, Mr. Rookwood," said Maisie, huskily. "I want you—I want your help, very much. I am in very great trouble. I do not want to tell you what the trouble is, but it is very serious; and the worst part of it is that I am dreadfully afraid of my father."

Pleydell made a sudden, surprised movement.

Rookwood was palpably embarrassed.

"Yes?" he said, awkwardly.

"You are the only hope of help I have," cried Maisie, passionately, "and if you will not help me there is only one alternative." She stopped abruptly.

"I will help you with everything I have in the world," declared Rookwood; and the ring of his voice sent the girl's eyes searchingly to his face. If only he were honest! How was she to know?

"I don't know how far I can trust you," she exclaimed, unhappily. "I don't know how far you are involved in all this abomination."

Pleydell stepped quickly to the hearth and Maisie turned instinctively to Rookwood as if to avert a blow.

She could not have pleaded her cause more eloquently.

"I do not think I am involved in any abomination," he said, quickly; "I do not know of any. My chief desire is to get you away from all associations that may distress you, and to keep you safe. My dear, if you can only trust me . . ."

"Perhaps, Maisie," interrupted Pleydell, mellifluously, "you would not mind being more explicit and telling us what it is you are afraid of?"

There was menace under his silky tones.

"I am afraid of you," cried Maisie. "I dare not be left alone with him." She clung to Rookwood. "There are other things, things that may happen to me; but I am most afraid of all of being left alone with him."

"Really, my dear girl," protested Pleydell, pityingly, "you must be dreaming. Let me ring for Mrs. Fenton to get you to bed and to-morrow we will send for Doctor Merton. Your nerves must be all to pieces."

"People's nerves do not get like that without some reason, Mr. Peyton," interposed Rookwood, sharply. "What you have been doing to the child these last weeks I do not know, but I intend to take her out of your custody now. You can prosecute me for abduction, if you like!" with a grim smile.

Maisie had shrunk in terror at mention of the doctor; and now relaxed and looked up.

"Where will you take me?" she asked.

Rookwood was nonplussed. He could not think of anywhere to take her.

"Never mind where," he said. "You will be safe and comfortable, and I'll get a license and we can be married at once." He rang the bell. They waited in silence until Fenton appeared.

"Can your wife come here, Fenton?" asked Rookwood; and presently Mrs. Fenton was at the door.

"Take Miss Maisie upstairs, please, Mrs. Fenton, and

pack her things for her and bring her down here. Lock the door while you are in her room and do not let anyone in—not your husband nor Mr. Peyton nor anyone."

He led Maisie to the door and handed her over to Mrs. Fenton; then closed the door behind him.

"See here, Peyton, it is no use getting ratty about this. You have frightened the girl somehow, and she is better away from you. I don't want explanations; I only want Maisie. I won't try and get things out of her; it is all no concern of mine, so long as I get her free of it, whatever it is. Don't you try to interfere—take my advice. I am not much impressed with you in the character of parent and guardian, you know, in spite of your very clever acting, and I might be in a position to make things awkward for you, unless you leave us alone."

Pleydell shrugged his shoulders, and flung himself into the big chair. He was not ill-pleased at the prospect of getting rid of Maisie by a quick marriage, and shutting both these inconvenient mouths. He was only still worried about how much Everard knew. If Maisie were arrested on suspicion, all the fat would be in the fire . . . It would be safer under those circumstances to have her at hand.

By-and-by Maisie and Mrs. Fenton came down, and Fenton was sent for a taxi. Maisie flung her arms round the old woman's neck and was kissed and blessed and wept over; then she said coldly, "Good-bye, father."

"Good-bye, daughter," returned her parent, sarcastically.

Rookwood put her into the taxi, and got in himself after saying "Claridge's Hotel" to the driver. He reached out of the door to shut it securely, and as he sat back in his seat saw the further door being opened by one man, while another moved round and took his place by the driver. The man who opened the door got in, and put down one of the small seats, installing himself on it

and wrapping his coat skirts about his knees with care and precision.

"I am sorry to intrude, or to interfere with your plans," he observed, gravely, as Rookwood stared at him in silence; "but I am afraid I must trouble Miss Peyton to come with me to Scotland Yard."

It was Everard.

CHAPTER XXV

AT BAY

Canon Row police-station is practically in New Scotland Yard, although a great effort is made by the Force to keep the fact from the public. The two are as distinct, officially, as Downing Street and the House of Commons. In actual geographical fact, the one embraces the other. The taxi conveying the incongruous party drew up inside the Yard, and Maisie was ushered into the station between Rookwood and the plain-clothes man who had driven beside the chauffeur. Everard disappeared into some limbo of authority and was swallowed up by official mystery. Rookwood and Maisie were allowed to sit in an inner room in comparative privacy, for some considerable time. Neither spoke, and Maisie made no attempt to approach Rookwood or to confide in him. He, on his part, hardly knew what to do or say that would not seem like an attempt to force her confidence. They sat aloof and wretched, tongue-tied and forlorn.

The slamming of a distant echoing door galvanized Rookwood into speech.

"Maisie," he said, gathering her into his arms, "I do not want to ask questions or to know things you do not want to tell me. I only want you to know that I shall be always ready to help in any way. If they send you to prison—I do not care what you have done or not done—I shall be waiting for you at the prison gates when you come out."

He stopped abruptly, meaning every word that he said, but knowing that he would be ashamed of it afterwards.

She let him kiss her, in silence; she was in a benumbed condition, feeling that to know something definitely, and not to be perpetually under the shadow of different kinds of dread, gave her the relief of the inevitable. She was safe from her father, at any rate.

She leant her head against Rookwood's shoulder, her cap in her lap, her hands lying lightly on his. Now and again he clasped her a little closer; and she drew comfort vaguely, from some idea that penetrated her stupor of his patience and strength and forbearance. They were roused by a knock and a discreet cough. The big inspector, so well known to the militant suffragettes, stood at the door; and presently they followed him into the superintendent's office.

Everard was there. Rookwood did not speak to him. The superintendent explained to Maisie, with occasional lapses in the direction of Rookwood, that she was "detained" on suspicion of being concerned in the theft of the Dockyard plans. She need not say anything; but any statement she made would be taken down, and anything she said was liable to be used against her.

"Oh yes; I know," said Maisie, wearily.

"Do you wish to make any statement?" asked the superintendent.

"No!" said Maisie with scorn. "Not to you."

She would understand, went on the superintendent, that she was not yet being charged. Inquiries would be further made; meanwhile she would be detained. It was the wish of everyone concerned that she should be as comfortable as possible; and if she would like to have a lady friend to spend the night with her, Captain Everard would not oppose her wish.

Rookwood caught at this; and the taxi was sent back with a note for Mrs. Fenton, who arrived, after an alarming delay, with a bundle and a basket. Into her care, with a world of thanks, Rookwood committed Maisie.

"I will come to-morrow morning and see what arrangements can be made," he said. "We shall want the best possible legal advice, and bail if possible."

He kissed Maisie's unresponsive face tenderly, the superintendent turning a sympathetic countenance away, while Everard never moved his eyes from a document he appeared to be studying. Mrs. Fenton murmured, "My dear lamb, come then," and other unmeaning phrases; and Rookwood departed, feeling at odds with all the world.

Restless and unable to settle to anything, or even to make up his mind to go to bed, he paced his room and smoked cigarette after cigarette, until he heard Lord Johnny come home with rather more than the usual amount of noise. There was the usual call for Fenton, the usual stamping up the stairs, the usual banging of the door and kicking off of boots.

Neither Fenton nor Pleydell had approached Rookwood for news of their respective female belongings, and Rookwood in his unsociable frame of mind would probably have given them but little information if they had. But he was smitten with a sudden desire to "have it out" with this absurd old buffoon whose godson and secretary had both been arrested in regard to the same affair. It was not impossible that the old ass might blunder on some fact that would be of use. It was worth trying.

Lord Johnny was immensely surprised to hear a knock at his door after Fenton had left him. He was no longer in fear of Carrington, but there was a lurking fancy in his mind that it might be Maisie. He lolled sideways so that he could see round the arm of his chair as he mouthed a whiskyish "Come in!" Rookwood was the last person he expected.

"Why! Hullo, Rookwood. Come in. Come and sit down. I'm blessed if this isn't a surprise. I don't be-

lieve you have ever dropped in of an evening before. Peyton does sometimes; pleasant chap, Peyton; and so does Rawleigh when he is at home; but you never do. Well, I'm blessed. This is a surprise. Pour yourself out a drink, man, pour yourself out a drink. Can't talk dry, you know. Sit down."

"I don't want to drink, Lord John, thank you. I want to talk to you. Your godson, you know—forgive me touching on a sore point—is accused of being concerned in this queer Dockyard business. Do you know that your secretary, Miss Peyton, is also suspected—arrested, in fact?"

Lord Johnny sat up smartly as if moved by an electric shock.

"When?" he shouted.

"Please do not talk loudly," said Rookwood. "This evening—just now. I want to know if you can think of anything that could connect her with the matter; anything that could seem to cast suspicion her way. Did she ever meet this young Glanville, or have any dealings with him?"

Lord Johnny stared like a fish. His carelessness was coming home to him with a vengeance. Then he exploded.

"That was it, then! That sly little minx, with her pretence at sweet simplicity—and giving me good advice! God damn my soul, my dear fellow! I see the whole thing! Well, I'm . . .! *Well!* To think of her making a fool of me like that! And telling me I ought to be more careful . . . Of all the artful jades . . ."

"I should be much obliged if you would tell me what you mean in plain language, Lord John; and in the meantime I would like you to know that the young lady you are referring to is going to be my wife. She is not to be called a jade or a minx in my hearing, if you please."

Lord Johnny fell back in his chair and cackled with

laughter. The joke was too much for him, it really was. Think of that girl . . . He laughed until tears ran down his cheeks.

"I beg your pardon, old chap. I really beg your . . . ha-ha-ha-ha . . . ha-ha. I see it all; yes, I see, I see; ha-ha."

With a good deal of difficulty and in a furious rage, Rookwood got him to the point of explaining that Maisie had never actually met Glanville, but that he, Lord Johnny, had told her to search for the plan.

"What plan?"

"Well, you know, that's telling," answered Lord Johnny, uneasily conscious that he was getting into deep water.

"Do you mean," said Rookwood, with a sinking of the heart, "that you had this plan thing here?"

"Fellows bring me things," explained Lord Johnny, in an injured tone. "I can't help their doing that."

"Do you really mean that confidential designs belonging to the Dockyards lie about loose in your rooms?" demanded Rookwood incredulously.

"They weren't lying loose," retorted Lord Johnny; "at least, they were not supposed to be. That was what I got a secretary for, hang it all."

"Can you try and put things so that one can understand them?" asked Rookwood, testily. "For God's sake tell me about this plan; or hang it all, man, I'll inform the police about it. You had no more business to have it than Miss Peyton, for that matter."

Thus admonished, Lord Johnny told a complicated tale —unnecessarily complicated, because of his peculiar style of narration and because of the need which was upon him of concealing the grosser forms of his neglect, and, if possible, protecting Carrington.

"You had the plan—most improperly—to compare with Captain Blessington's, which was never brought to

you. You missed it—when? Before or after Miss Peyton came to you?"

"Before, before! A good while before. It was because I was so worried that I got Miss Peyton."

"When did she know of this loss?"

"I told her at once, God bless me, and set her searching for it. Told her how important it was, and what a lot of money some people would give for it."

Rookwood groaned inwardly.

"She never found it—no wonder, little slyboots. But she hadn't the nerve to carry it through, and sent it back when poor Ernest was arrested. Well; he will be released now, perhaps. It's an ill wind . . ." He cackled again, and mouthed the proverb and mumbled it over; and Rookwood cursed himself for coming and went to bed disconsolate.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PORTSMOUTH CASE

Rookwood's note had conveyed no idea to Mrs. Fenton that her destiny was the police-station; so Fenton and Pleydell knew nothing of the latest development until Fenton took Lord Johnny's breakfast up.

A hurried confabulation took place as to whether it would look better if Pleydell turned up at Canon Row and asked to see his daughter; or no. In the end they decided that the most natural thing was the safest; and Pleydell went round to Canon Row. But Maisie stoutly refused to see him.

"I do not wish to see anyone but Mr. Rookwood," she declared. "Tell my father he had better go home. I can manage very well."

"I hardly wonder," was the sorrowful remark of her affectionate and apparently prostrated parent when this message was delivered; "I hardly wonder that she dare not face me. It is a dreadful thing to have brought upon us."

"Do you believe your daughter guilty, then, sir?" asked the guileless inspector; and the equally guileless Pleydell shook an afflicted head and said, "There is not much room for doubt, I fear, is there? Not much room for doubt."

"Artful old beggar!" was the inspector's comment. "Wonder what his game is?"

Rookwood had already been, and stayed with Maisie while Mrs. Fenton went out to order some necessary articles of food for her lamb. They were allowed to or-

der in meals, and every effort was made to make them comfortable within the limits provided by the official accommodation. Rookwood promised to bring rugs, pillows, and various other things from No. 29 if a second night were to be spent in Canon Row; and then had a confab with authority.

"We will see whether she can be identified by the post-office clerk," said the big inspector; "and if so, it will be all plain sailing. But if not, we may detain her longer, or else let her go. It is impossible to say."

What Rookwood was not told, however, was that so soon as he had left the house that morning, the minions of the Criminal Investigation Department had invaded No. 29, and had had an interview with Lord Johnny. Fenton and Pleydell, who understood about such things, were expecting it; and had prepared, in a clever pencilled imitation of Maisie's handwriting, a careless slip of memorandum which might have been a list of the purloined documents in a girl's phrases.

Plan of Battleship.
Key to gun arrangements.
Address of agent.
Price—separately, and altogether.
E. R. Glanville, secretary to Deputy Assistant Port Superintendent.
Young, poor, engaged.

It was a damning little document, crumpled up among her handkerchiefs.

One corner of the paper was torn off edgeways. It was a page from a pocket-book with perforated lines for tearing out the little sheets. No book of any sort corresponding with this bit of paper was found among her belongings. Detective-Sergeant Willis put the scrap carefully by in his big wallet.

Maisie's room was searched first, and then Pleydell's sitting-room and bedroom. Pleydell gave every facility,

and allowed some of his luggage to be sealed up for a more careful overhauling at Scotland Yard.

"A good deal might be stowed away in your things," said the detective drily, "without your dreaming of it." And Pleydell knew that he was under suspicion too, and that all too possibly he was the real quarry they were hunting.

At Lord Johnny's they drew blank. The old boy, now thoroughly scared, refused to make statements. "I will consult my legal adviser," was the formula he stuck to. "I don't want to be mixed up in other people's affairs." Pressed for information, he grew noisy and abusive. "How the devil should I know what she did, once I was away from here? One thing I can assure you, she never met young Glanville here. Never heard of him, so far as I know, until long after the . . ." He stopped abruptly, horrified at what he had been going to say.

"Long after what, my lord?" asked the respectful detective-sergeant.

"Oh—ah—er, long after—er—my godson paid his last visit here. She never saw him then and never heard of him until after he had gone. There was only one person here who knew much about him, and that was the landlord. Fenton, the landlord. Fenton. *He* knew; and he was about as likely to talk of my visitors to Miss Peyton as His Majesty is to talk about his to you."

"What was the nature of his knowledge, my lord?"

"Oh—ah—he just knew about him, y' know. Knew what his job was and that he was a promising youngster and did confidential work and wanted to get married and was too hard up. All that kind of thing."

"Do you happen, my lord, to have in this room, or for your use anywhere, a pocket-book that this page fits?"

Lord Johnny scrutinized the crumpled page.

"Certainly not. I wouldn't be seen dead with a common commercial-traveller-kind-of-thing like that; no,

certainly not. Miss Peyton never used anything like that for my work. She had proper notebooks; and if she made memoranda, she had a small calendar pocket-book with date and all about the moon; y' know the kind."

The commercial-traveller-kind-of-thing had rather woolly paper, and lines that crossed each other at close intervals, making the whole surface of the paper into tiny squares—both ugly and tiresome and not even useful.

"Where have I seen . . . ?" mused Lord Johnny. He could not pin down the memory, but he had seen a bit of paper like that recently. It danced away tantalizingly the more he sought to recall it.

The piece of paper was shown to Maisie, who looked at it without interest.

"Is that your writing?" asked the big inspector.

"Yes," said Maisie, dully; then looking at it a little more closely, "at least—I don't know. What is it about?"

She read the lines, which at first did not convey much meaning. Then she asked:

"Where did you get this?"

"In a drawer in your room."

"If you are going to tell me lies," said Maisie, severely, "it will be better for me not to talk to you. This has nothing to do with me, and it was not in any drawer of mine when I left the house yesterday. Mrs. Fenton can say that. She went through my things with me."

A little before one, the post-office clerk was confronted with Maisie, and failed to identify her face, but was able to give a recognizable description of the dress she had worn; the dress being afterwards produced. By this time John Black, K.C., instructed by Messrs. Sydney, Benham, and Sydney, had been roped in for Maisie's defence and had already formed the opinion that she knew exactly where she was, and was a very deep and calculating young woman, in spite of her assumption of

shyness and silence. He did not believe for a moment she was frightened.

Rookwood exhorted Maisie to tell Black everything there was for him to know, so that he might be able to do the best for her; and then hurried away so that his presence should not embarrass her. High above her fears for herself rose her anger at him. He talked about loving her and wanting her and waiting for her—yet he all too plainly believed her guilty. She did not want that kind of love—nasty kind of love, she called it. Jim Sefton could have given her that kind. Young Torrance, too; he doubted whether she were a very "nice" kind of girl but still wanted to marry her. Rookwood's love had roused something in her, a passionate desire to be trusted, to be believed in "through evil report and good report." Because of her opinion of him she had felt she could neither break her word nor give away her father; and almost at once he had shown himself base. When Black left her she cried herself into a quivering, helpless condition while Mrs. Fenton was away at No. 29; and when late that afternoon, on the strength of the bit of paper, it was decided to charge her formally, and she was driven to Bow Street, she paid no attention to anything said or done. Her weeping was past all control.

The warrant was read to her, but she took no heed and would not say whether she understood or not. Heavy sobs shook her all the time, and even the stolid custodian who drove to the Court with her was visibly moved. Black warned her to hold her tongue, but could not even tell if she heard him. In the dock, she leant huddled up against the woodwork, her gasping sobs echoing through the court and punctuating the dreary proceedings painfully. Everard, watching her with curiosity, put it down to anger at being worsted; but the big inspector nearly broke his heart over her.

The police evidence was short and to the point. The

post-office clerk's statement in regard to the posting of the letter, the cloak-room attendant, Detective-sergeant Willis, who found the scrap of paper and who had been with Everard at the arrest, and the accused's father, were the main points and witnesses produced; and the inquiry was adjourned for a week to enable the police to get their case up and connect it with the Portsmouth affair.

Pleydell went into the witness-box with bowed head, and took the oath. After a time, and apparently at the sound of his voice, Maisie's sobs became less, and eventually she appeared to be listening. Black watched her with lynx eyes.

Pleydell identified the accused as his daughter. She had sought him out, he believing her to be dead. The fraud practised on him by a dissolute woman excited sympathy; the way he told it. "I never cared much for anything after that," he explained, "and went more or less to the devil."

His daughter had been always under the influence of this mother, whose associates were—queer people of both sexes. A shockingly bad start in life for a young girl; it ought to ensure lenient judgment, he asserted, solemnly, for anything she might have been tempted to do. Brought back to relevancy, witness apologized and looked abashed.

He had known nothing; of course he had known nothing. He had been astonished at her leaving Lord John's employ and he had been worried about certain passages—here witness looked overcome. He did not know what his daughter's ways were with men. She had been badly brought up . . .

Maisie's uplifted head and white tense face caught the eye of the Court. She had her gaze fixed intently on her father.

"O you hound!" she half-whispered, so intent on the horrible exhibition of evil before her as to forget all else.

The soft unconscious exclamation was heard by sev-

eral people in the Court. For a moment, they forgot her swollen eyes and leaden face; they only noted the concentration, the surprised, almost horrified concentration on a sight that to her, quite evidently, exceeded in horror her own situation. For a flash this idea held them. The next moment the Bench was asking:

"Have you any real reason to distrust your daughter's integrity or discretion?"

"That is a hard question for a father to answer, your worship."

"You need not answer it," said his worship, drily.

"The damned swine!" said the big inspector, into his chest.

Maisie was remanded to Holloway, and an order was afterwards made that Mrs. Fenton and Rookwood, besides her legal advisers, were to have access to her.

Black was puzzled. That Maisie could produce a defence he was now certain. He was beginning to think that she was trying to divert the blame from young Glanville's shoulders to her own, but that it was on the surface unlikely, seeing that he was engaged to another girl. In a long interview with Rookwood, at which Mr. Sydney junior was present, he pressed on Rookwood to have done with delicacy and refinements and to worm the girl's secret out of her any way he could.

"She will be committed for trial next week," he said, "unless we can make her speak. If Lord Johnny goes into the box, it is all up. Tell her that her father—rub it in hot about his trying his best to get her convicted—he has put the police on to questioning Lord Johnny about the plan he asked her to search for, just to make them drag the old fool in; and tell her that he admitted almost at once having lost something of great importance. They will turn him inside out at the Assizes. Try and exasperate her into speaking. Her father is the card to use—she perfectly hates him."

Rookwood was allowed to see Maisie alone. She showed no signs of pleasure at seeing him. He began by telling her about her father and Lord Johnny. Her face flushed. But when he began to press her to take them into her confidence, and pointed out that it was not fair to Black to expect him to work in the dark, she flared up.

"Let him leave it alone, then! I never asked him to mix himself up in it. *Fair* to him! Why should I bother to be fair to him! If people would try to be fair to me, it would be more to the point."

"Dearest, we all want to be fair to you. But you won't let us help you. How can we put up a proper defence if we don't know what the facts are?"

"You have all made up your minds about the facts," said Maisie, slowly, looking away from him.

"I want you to understand, dearest girl, that all that does not matter. It makes no difference in my feeling for you——"

"But it makes all the difference in the world to my feeling for you," cried she, passionately. "Do you suppose I want a man to love me and then think me guilty of a mean crime on the first possible opportunity? What good is your love, that you are always putting forward as if it were something so wonderful, to me if it does not make you believe in me? Anyone could love me like that; any coarse brute who didn't care what my mind or morals were so long as my skin is white and my hair gold——"

She broke off, rather ashamed.

Rookwood, poor fellow, was utterly overwhelmed. He felt the most unmitigated scoundrel, and almost accepted Maisie's estimate of his faithful unquestioning love. It was, in its way, he felt now, an insult; what decent girl would not resent having it taken for granted that she was a criminal! How had he dared take up that condescending attitude? And worst of all, what was he to do now?

Maisie dangled her arm wearily over the back of the chair and gazed at the mean window. Her outburst had not done much good, it seemed. Rookwood did not believe. But suddenly she felt him at her feet on the bare floor, his arms round her knees, his face in her lap.

"Can you ever forgive me?" he muttered.

Maisie thought, at that moment, that she would rather have had Sefton's unscrupulous passion. She did not know what she wanted. When Rookwood thought her guilty but stuck to her, she was angry and disgusted. Now that he believed her and was penitent, she was no better pleased. He ought to have known from the first. It spoilt it all, that she had to tell him. Sefton would not have needed to be told. He would have known; but then he was a real criminal and knew the difference. Rookwood did not.

He felt her unresponsive, to his bitter pain, and gave a sort of moan; and mechanically she stroked his hair and let her fingers rest against his cheek. He turned his lips against them; and presently rose and tried to face the situation.

"I have done you a very grievous wrong," he said, "and nothing I can say will make it less offensive or less insulting. Will you tell me something, no matter what, that I can do to make up for it?"

"Don't talk about it any more," answered Maisie, absently.

"What am I to say to Black?"

"Tell him to go to Jericho. I don't want him meddling. I can manage myself." And the distracted Rookwood could get nothing else out of her.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PORTSMOUTH CASE—Continued

THE next day Maisie was sent down to Portsmouth, and two or three days later she and Glanville were put in the dock and charged with being concerned together in the theft of the Dockyard documents, the burglary at Sir Arthur Melton's, and various other forms of crime so interwoven as to cover any and every imaginable act which both or either might have committed in getting or disposing of said documents. And for the first time Maisie was brought into the presence of the man whom she believed to be her father's accomplice.

They stood side by side, too shy to look squarely at each other; but glancing at him under her lashes, Maisie took quick stock of the sturdy boyish shoulders, the round good-humoured face, and nondescript English colouring of the accused lad. She saw, too, tucked away in a far corner, a shrinking figure with a tear-blurred face towards whom her fellow-culprit ever and anon shot looks of tenderness and encouragement. The shrinking figure was shabbily clad and lacked the assurance of society standing; but Maisie's heart swelled at the evidence of grief in every line and every gesture.

To Maisie, Glanville was the real culprit and she herself the victim; and equally of course, to him she was the guilty and he the innocent accused. He felt a sense of outrage at her proximity, until, after looking round the Court, his glance fell on her by accident. Then he gazed in undisguised interest.

His young ardent chivalry awoke at once, and he could

have shouted his testimony to her innocence aloud. And when, presently, in answer to an unimportant question from the Bench, Glanville made one of his boyish, eager answers, the fresh unaffected voice made much the same impression on Maisie. She turned quickly towards him to listen; and when a minute later she caught his eye, and gave him the shadow of a smile, the two moved by a spontaneous impulse a trifle closer together. The movement indicated a mute but completely satisfactory understanding.

The feeling of human fellowship warmed Maisie's numbed heart. She even regarded Rookwood more kindly in consequence; and she settled down to take an interest in the case. The Court was packed; and the devouring curiosity and sensation-mongering which seemed the main emotions inspiring the audience, at first disgusted her and then gave her a defiant courage. Also, she came to a resolution and began to think out her case. She was going to fight for this boy. He could not be sacrificed to save a man like her father, nor to satisfy her own notions of filial duty. When he was merely the lesser of two criminals it had not mattered so much; but now she was positive that the Boss had lied to her about him. She would fight.

She listened contemptuously to the theory of the prosecution. It was ingenious, but involved, and was palpably hampered by the knowledge that there were things it was better not to say publicly. It turned upon the fact that Lord John, who notoriously was consulted confidentially by very large numbers of people, had confided to his secretary that he had lost an important design showing how a battleship could be equipped so as to treble her armament capacity; and in mentioning this had also mentioned that various such schemes were under consideration in the Dockyards. He had also spoken of his godson's confidential position; and it was through this knowledge that

she had come to seek him out. An envelope in handwriting now discovered to be Maisie's had been found at his rooms; and in her room had been found a most suggestive memorandum which included the words "Glanville: Young, poor, engaged." It was to her he had posted the plans—probably to Lord John's address, where she would get them and open them in the ordinary way of her business as secretary—and she had sent them back either in the vain hope that their return would clear Glanville, or more probably because, in view of his arrest, she was unable to continue the negotiations for their disposal without him. She would be afraid to keep them.

All this was set forth with much circumlocution and unction; and it foreshadowed that Lord Johnny, sooner or later, would be put in the witness-box for the prosecution. It also showed that the police had got hold of the incident of his loss of a document of importance; what Maisie knew besides, about that document, would make them stare, by-and-by, she felt.

The case as put was purely ridiculous, and it was a matter of urgency to get more information. Maisie looked on the police, who could travel so wide of the mark, with huge contempt; yet they had in their absurd theory a peg on which to hang evidence; and the evidence was pretty damning.

The spider's web veil, the dress Maisie had worn, the scrap of paper found in her room, the handwriting—only thinly disguised—on the envelope enclosing the returned plans, and the similarity between that envelope and the one found in Glanville's rooms (which had enclosed only some cuttings from the Press concerning a question of Lord John's about some naval matter) all made a pretty strong case against Maisie. The case against Glanville began with his confidential position and grew with some perfectly innocent, but under these circumstances entirely compromising, associations with divers and sundry aliens;

and some moonlight strollings in which his love-smitten condition had prompted him to indulge. Glanville was not represented by counsel, as he, dreading the expense, had declared he would not be defended unless and until he was committed for trial. Maisie had rejected Mr. Black's aid scornfully; but he was in court with Rookwood, watching the case with the utmost interest. Black had been much amused when told by the big inspector how promptly Maisie had rejected his—Black's—services when it had been explained to her that if he spoke for her, she would not be allowed to speak for herself.

"That settles it," she had said.

Maisie was quick to pick up the procedure of the Court, and listened intently when Glanville asked one or two artless questions of the witnesses. Rookwood was beside her, and she exchanged one or two written remarks, and a few whispered ones, with him. She had refused to ask any questions herself, all through the morning, and had made the Court smile involuntarily after one peculiarly imaginative flight of a Dockyard official.

"Do you wish to ask any questions, Peyton?" asked the Bench with that gratuitous insolence towards persons still unconvicted which, to quote Mr. Paul Taylor, is "the custom of these Courts" when addressing prisoners.

"Any questions?" echoed Maisie. "To that silly old man? No, thank you!"

Later on a detective employed by the Dockyards was recalled to supplement some evidence given against Glanville.

"Have you any questions to ask this witness, Peyton?" said the Bench once more. The magistrate before whom Glanville had first been charged was not present.

Maisie had been brooding over the Bench's discourtesy.

"What is that you called me?" she asked, sharply.

"What? What did I call you? Peyton. Peyton. That is your name, is it not?"

"It is neither my name, nor is it the way I am accustomed to be addressed," she retorted. "You are neither accurate nor well bred."

To say this created a sensation is to put it mildly. Glanville gave a subdued but mirthful chuckle.

The Bench was speechless for an appreciable period. The police nearly burst with suppressed joy, which Maisie's further remarks, however, converted into annoyance. Then there was a whispered confabulation between the Bench and the clerk and a reference to various official documents. Finally the Bench delivered itself.

"I find you are stated to be named Peyton, alias Pleydell——" the presiding magistrate began.

"Then the statement is wrong," interrupted Maisie. "My name is Margaret Pleydell, and Peyton is my father's second name, which he preferred to use, and wished me to use when I came to live with him. Peyton is the alias, not Pleydell. It does not look as if you were very well-informed about this case, if you begin with a mistake like that."

The Court elicited then from the police that she had refused to supply any information about her name, age, or occupation when arrested in London.

"You cannot be surprised, then, if mistakes are made," commented the Bench, severely.

"I thought it was the business of the police to find things out," answered the unrepentant Maisie, "not to get their work done for them by the people they accuse."

"Do you wish to ask this witness any questions?" asked the Chairman, loudly.

"Yes."

Maisie addressed herself to the witness.

"You are a confidential employee?"

"Yes."

"You knew Mr. Glanville to be confidential secretary to Admiral Burleigh?"

"Yes."

"Admiral Burleigh," feeling her way, "is Acting Deputy Assistant Port Superintendent?"

"Yes."

"The real Deputy is away?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He is on a special mission overseas."

"How long has he been away?"

"Eight months."

"Had he a confidential secretary?"

"Yes."

"Who is he, and where is he now?"

"He was Mr. Agnew; he is now head of another department."

"In the Dockyard?"

"Yes."

"So he as well as Mr. Glanville knows where these confidential matters are kept, and he had the keys to the safes at one time?"

"Yes."

"Does he ever go abroad?"

"Yes, sometimes."

"Then he would meet aliens, like Mr. Glanville?"

"Yes."

"When did he last go?"

"Last week," reluctantly.

"Dear, dear!" said Maisie, dimpling and smiling at the success of her bow drawn at a venture. "That is very suspicious, isn't it? Let me see; was not Admiral Burleigh ill some time ago?"

"Yes."

"Who took his place?"

"Captain Carrington."

"And had the keys, and access to all these confidential matters?"

"Yes."

Maisie paused, and thought a bit.

"When were these plans or things first missed?"

"On the third of last month."

"And when were they last seen before that?"

"I do not know."

"Does anyone know?"

"I could not say."

"Has no one tried to find out?"

"I do not know. I do not think so."

"I think that is abominable!" cried Maisie. "How can you tell that Mr. Agnew, or Captain Carrington, did not steal the things?"

"That is a very wild theory," smiled the witness, with immeasurable superiority.

"It is not a bit more wild than that Mr. Glanville and I stole them. If we are going in for wild theories we may as well have them all. Now about the 'key' of this plan; that was not kept in the same place as the other?"

"No."

"Where were they both?"

"The one was in Admiral Burleigh's official safe; and the other in Sir Arthur Melton's private safe at his residence."

"How long ago was that last seen?"

"I do not know."

"Does anyone really know that it was in the safe at all when the safe was cut open; and does anyone really know when precisely the safe *was* cut open?"

"I do not think so."

"They don't know anything at all about it," exclaimed Maisie, scornfully, to the Bench. "I wonder you let them come here, with such a cock-and-bull story as all that!"

The Bench majestically interposed, the witness was released, and the Court adjourned.

"Bravo," said Glanville audibly, as he was led out of the dock.

The Dockyard detective got a terrible roasting from the police, for being turned inside out like that by a bit of a girl; and the inspector who had been so certain of Glanville's innocence waxed eloquent over Maisie's ability.

"Very smart girl," he repeated again and again, "and handsome too! No flies on her!"

"A damn sight too smart," remarked Detective-sergeant Robertson. "She's been there before, or I'll eat my hat. She had the things all right!"

"She means to get the youngster off if she can, and I believe she'll do it," said his approving colleague.

Rookwood and Black were allowed a few minutes with Maisie during the lunch hour; and she took them in hand without delay.

"I know all about the whole thing," she said, "but I won't tell unless I tell it the way I like. If Admiral Burleigh will come here and see me, I will tell him the whole story; and then he can judge whether it ought to be made public or not. Can you get him to come and see me?"

The case was to come on again at 3.30; and there was not much chance of getting Admiral Burleigh before then; but Rookwood hurried off hopefully, trying hard not to think what Maisie's knowledge of the case might portend; and Black went to the Chief Constable to smooth the path.

When they met again that afternoon in the dock, Maisie nodded to Glanville in a friendly fashion, and he whispered, "You were fine this morning!" She took little further interest, however, in the evidence, and cross-examined no more witnesses.

Admiral Burleigh was in Court for half an hour, be-

fore the proceedings closed. His evidence was to be taken later. He took good stock of this girl, who had sent him the extraordinary message—a message to say she would tell him about the stolen plans if he would give her an interview. It made him nervous, and he wondered if it were at all a proper proceeding, and felt that he might be involving himself in something shady. He resolved eventually that he would first ask the presiding magistrate's opinion.

When the Court rose, he found that functionary in the magistrates' room. On stating the position, the dispenser of justice, who was already impressed with the conviction that Maisie was a strange and defiant and, therefore, a dangerous character, could not see his way to advising without consulting the Chief Constable. That official, being a person of robust common sense and no prejudices, opined that the Admiral would be extremely foolish if he did not see the prisoner.

"Who brought the message to you?" he asked.

"A fellow I never saw before—name of Rook—Rook—Rook something. He looked all right. He is waiting, by-the-by, somewhere in the Court."

A minion was sent to summon Rookwood to the consultation; and by bawling out something like his name, discovered and produced him.

Rookwood impressed his point of view as earnestly as he could upon the shy and perspiring Admiral; so that eventually he persuaded him, accompanied by the Chief Constable, to whom he clung for moral support, to come to the police-station. The Chief Constable ushered them into his private office, and had Maisie fetched from the cells. The inspector who took such an interest in Glanville escorted her from her cell; and at the door of the Chief's office gave her arm an encouraging squeeze.

"Do you mind my being here?" asked Rookwood. "I will go if you would rather."

"No, you can say," she answered. "Is this Admiral Burleigh?"

"Yes," said the Chief Constable. "You want to make a statement to him, I understand. Will you have any objection to its being taken down?"

"*I* shan't have any objection," said Maisie, smiling, "but I am afraid Admiral Burleigh will. Had you not better wait till you hear what it is?"

Maisie had quite recovered herself and felt equal to any emergency now. Indeed, she could not quite understand why she ever felt so overcome.

Then she began. Her tale was necessarily told piecemeal, with breaks and harkings back, and some incoherencies; but it held together and carried conviction. She told of her deserted childhood and her mother's life and death, of finding her father and of taking up Lord Johnny's work; of his utter irresponsibility and the nature of his lost plan; of her father's intrusion during Lord Johnny's absences from home; of how she rescued the plans and was kidnapped and brought back to be made to marry Rookwood after being told that Glanville was her father's confederate and being threatened with prosecution as his partner.

"I am certain," she said, "that my father has made his money in that way. Lord John is incredibly careless, and after he had set me to look for that plan, I found a complete description of the secret part, with two copies in Lord John's handwriting; and a letter from Captain Carrington, who had got in a fright, asking if he would send the plan back at once, and burn the other thing, the description part. I did not attach so much importance to it then; but I know what it all means now. I can tell you exactly where to find that letter, and Mrs. Fenton would give evidence—I know she would hate it, but she would do it—that my father was always in the other lodgers' rooms. And as my father is a criminal, and has

associates who are criminals, he is far more likely to be the criminal in this case than we are. I hate saying this; I have fought against the idea of sending my father back to gaol—although he does not mind my going there! The piece of paper found in my room belongs to his note-book—he put it there to get me convicted. I hate going back on my word, even although I was forced into giving it; but I have to do something wrong anyhow; and I must choose which is the least wrong."

After the first few minutes, when they had interposed some questions and some interruptions, the three men listened to Maisie in absolute silence. When she finished, the deep breaths they drew testified to their interest in her tale.

"Why did you not tell this in Court?" asked Admiral Burleigh, in a fault-finding manner.

Maisie looked at him with a grimace.

"I will if you like," she murmured. "If you think the Dockyards, and the Government, would like to have the story made public about secret documents copied and sent flying round the country by trusted officials, to prove the Government's dishonesty and incompetence, and every imaginable kind of secret process confided to that old donkey, Lord John, with people like my father prying into them; if you think I had better say it in Court, I will; and I certainly will, if I am to go on being treated as a criminal. I will tell everything, from A to Z. I will have Lord Johnny in the witness box, and he will soon let it all out; all about this business, and the new explosive, and the engineering scandal, and that chemical works, and General Pertwee's promotion, and Lady Louisa on the ironclad, and the Duke of March and the cheque, and what happened at the Second Sea Lord's house party, and the——"

"For Heaven's sake!" cried Admiral Burleigh, rising in great agitation, while the Chief Constable lay back and laughed loud and long.

CHAPTER XXVIII

COVERING THE TRACKS

In desperate haste, with shaking hands and fevered pulse, Lord Johnny went over the contents of his capacious desk. A pile of addressed envelopes spoke to what had already been done; a huge accumulation of burnt paper in the grate was still more eloquent. The inventors, the engineers, the confiding editors, and the Government officials were getting their indiscreet communications returned to them. Far into the night, after the receipt of the telegram that lay crumpled upon the big chair, he laboured, groaning, puffing, and complaining audibly to himself. He put it all down to the supreme folly of having a woman secretary. Like Bismarck, he bewailed the plans of a lifetime, upset by a meddling woman. And what the devil was the matter with Fenton? He had never known Fenton behave with so little consideration.

"Hasn't been near me this evening!" he grumbled.

Downstairs, Fenton was, however, much engaged. He was "having words" with Mrs. Fenton, and she was getting the best of it.

Pleydell had known, when his daughter was arrested without his agency, that his rope was running out. He had had a good run for his money; but his damned folly about his daughter had betrayed him. It was jolly well the last time he would ever give in to any weakness of feeling. The Boss had gone soft about the girl, too. Fancy, a chap like that! He had actually gone for him, Pleydell, when he found that he was trying to load up the case against the girl. What did he expect? Swinish luck, getting let in like this.

Pleydell's bags were packed, and his choicest possessions lodged in a neat packing case. In the grey of the morning he reckoned to slip away and melt into the great crowd unknown. He had realized all his financial resources and was planning an ingenious route that would lead him by gentle degrees to Paris. He was well found in clothes and toilette accessories, in smokes and appropriate jewellery and household equipment. He could begin again in some style, when he had found a pitch.

A latchkey in the door caught his ear; and then the door shut. In a very few moments there was a knock at his door, and it opened. He knew he was caught.

The two officers made a very complete search without finding anything more compromising than the pocket-book from which the incriminating scrap of paper had been torn, with the torn bit of corner still remaining. It was, however, enough; for across several of its common little pages were efforts, at first crude but afterwards more promising, at copying Maisie's writing in the words used on the crumpled slip of paper found in her room.

With his luggage repacked, and all his money and belongings, Pleydell left the house under escort, after the briefest possible farewell to Fenton. That oily person broke down and actually shed tears; but the escort cut the parting short.

So we come back to Mr. and Mrs. Fenton having words. Mrs. Fenton reproached Mr. Fenton with making a fuss over such a cold-blooded scoundrel after he had seen that poor lamb led away to the same fate without a word good or bad. And Mr. Fenton had told Mrs. Fenton that he would sooner see everyone else he knew, herself included, in hell than see Mr. Dick in gaol again; and Mrs. Fenton had said it was a bad day for the house when that bad man came into it and she was glad to her very boots to see him go out of it; and Fenton made a suitable and spirited retort about her being free to go out of it too

and no one would be the worse. And then he broke down again; and she wisely left him to himself and got him an excellent supper and some hot toddy; and he found peace in sleep. But Mr. Dick was not spending the night in gaol. He was escorted by the two uncommunicative men to the coast and embarked in their company on a vessel which deposited him on the hospitable shores of Belgium; and at parting his escort gave him some good advice with a stern warning, and a note from Maisie. In the note he was informed of the share he possessed in the Hôtel Bienfait; and thither he journeyed at once to enforce his claim, writing from that haven to Fenton and setting the faithful heart at rest.

A great deal of arrangement was necessary to avoid creating an atmosphere of public scandal; and *pourparlers* took place between a number of highly placed persons, one of whom interviewed Maisie himself with the Chief Constable and Admiral Burleigh. He was not disposed to accept Maisie's story off-hand, Carrington being a connection of his wife's; and showed a querulous desire to catch her out in some inaccuracy. He fell back, finally, on the fact that it was actually she who had posted the registered letter.

"There you are!" he exclaimed, as one who has scored a point.

"Certainly, it was I," argued Maisie. "Do you think any one of the actual criminals would have done it? I posted the things back to the people who had a right to them; and I have yet to learn that that is a crime! I stole them from the thieves; and they are a great deal more angry with me than you are! Do you think I ought to have left them where they were?"

"I think you ought to have told sooner."

"If you think that, then better make the other thief tell—the thief who stole the plan before my father did.

Why should I be the only one who ought to have told? Why do you not go and tell that to your Dockyard official and to Lord Johnny?"

"We are going to," said the Chief Constable, grimly.

A few days later Glanville and Maisie, who had been placed, for their comfort and convenience, in the "first division" section of the local prison, were once more brought into Court, and the police unreservedly withdrew all charges against them. The snare of circumstantial evidence was referred to; and the magistrates, while thanking the police for their present action and complimenting them on having left no stone unturned and praising the zeal which had, while unfortunately accusing innocent persons, succeeded eventually in tracing the real criminal, who had, unluckily, evaded arrest for the moment and left the country, had carefully abstained from giving any real information. Maisie and Glanville, they declared, left the Court without a stain upon their character.

It was a pretty sight to see how Glanville took his moist and still weeping *fiancée* in his arms and kissed her with unaffected devotion before the whole Court. Maisie envied them. Her relations with Rookwood were so strained she did not find any pleasure in them. Glanville and his little girl, however, took her to be as happy as themselves and nearly wrung their hands off; and they were all cheered as they left the Court.

The chastened Carrington, ever since his name had been mentioned by Maisie in cross-examination by the Dockyard detective, had lived a dog's life, on the edge of an abyss of discovery and disgrace. It was almost a relief when the blow fell, and his share in the scandal became known. All things considered, he got off lightly; but he never recovered his nerve, and to the end of his days refused to discuss, or be told, or in any way to have it admitted that he acknowledged or had any cognizance

of governmental lapses or departmental scandals. His friendship with Lord Johnny Delane was buried in the same grave with his own indiscretion. To the end of his life he clung to the belief, or the pretence, that young Glanville was in league with the criminals. It was a sop thrown to his own self-respect—the only one he ever got.

It is not to be supposed, however, that the dramatic collapse of the prosecution did not set tongues wagging. The public was mystified, not satisfied; and there were whispers and rumours; and much criticism of the police.

The Portsmouth police, than whom no body of men know, and keep, a greater amount of devastating secrets, smiled sardonically when twitted with "having come an awful mucker over that girl"; but all efforts at pumping them were fruitless. In naval and military circles, and in circles diplomatic, and in those society regions where the Great Ones are departmental chiefs and sub-chiefs, there was great activity of suggestion; and in one or two directions very intense anxiety. There were also nasty questions asked in Parliament, by one of those groups of investigating persons who so frequently get hold of the right end of the stick; but the Government was successful in snubbing them, and conveying the impression that they had been meddlesome and mistaken. There were people like Admiral Bayley, who knew all about the plan and the indiscretion and Captain Blessington's invention that started all the trouble, who told sly tales to chosen individuals about the hole Lord Johnny got himself into; but these, with the smallest exception, chose their confidantes discreetly. One there was, it must be owned, who told his tale to a fascinating lady, who turned out to be the wife of the erring Carrington's chief rival; and then there was trouble; but that, too, was smoothed over, in the end, though with much difficulty. And so the leaky Government craft for maintaining secrecy creaked on its

uneasy way, having escaped collision by the thickness of a sixpence; and diplomats and dockyards breathed again.

Maisie was given some letters that had come for her during her incarceration; and at the hotel to which Rookwood took her to lunch she read them. They had all been opened by the police. One was from Mrs. Simpson, in the utmost kindness, asking whether there was anything she could possibly do to help. Another was from Mrs. Chetwynde, who had seen Maisie's statement, that her name was not Peyton but Pleydell, in the paper and had had a wearing time concealing it from the Judge. She wrote anxiously, asking what she was to think and where was her brother; and begging Maisie not on any account to mention her connection with them in case the Judge should hear of it. And she was Maisie's ever-affectionate aunt who would never desert her no matter what she had done. Maisie laughed a little and frowned a little over this letter. She had a very tender spot in her heart for the only relative she knew, who was kind and loving. But she took it ill that, again, a person who was fond of her should be so ready to take it for granted that she had done something wrong.

There was a third letter, in the well-remembered handwriting of Miss Stutchberry. It seemed like an echo from another life.

This was a letter evidently written under the spur of intense though restrained curiosity; and it wanted to know whether the Margaret or Maisie Peyton, alias Pleydell, of the police-court reports, could be our old pupil little Maisie, who left us more than three years ago. If so, would she write a line to her old schoolmistresses and tell them if there was anything they could say or do to establish her character. "I need hardly say, my dear Maisie, if it be really you, that neither my dear sister nor I believe for one moment that you have committed

any criminal act, no matter how unfortunate you may have been in allowing yourself to be entangled in false appearances. Do write to us, if you are allowed, and tell us how you stand and what we can do for you; and above all, how and where you found the father, that we believed to have been long since dead."

"Ah," cried Maisie; and tears stood in her eyes. "*They* believe in me! They don't think me a criminal. *They* could feel sure of me, those dear old ladies. If only you could have, what a difference it would have made!"

Rookwood looked, as he felt, deeply distressed.

They journeyed to London together, in a first-class compartment, and Maisie read the local evening paper's account of her discharge. Rookwood stared out of the window at the flying country-side as it slipped past, and brooded over the situation. Maisie looked at him now and again under her lashes.

She hated this attitude of penitence and humility even more than she had hated his high-minded determination to ignore her shame. Why did he not laugh, or chaff her, or tell her that he had been a fool but that she must make up her mind that he *was* a fool; or any other high-handed way of carrying it off; instead of this abject depression, making one feel so uncomfortable! Maisie's mind wandered over the realms of fiction, and remembered the haughty heroines who were represented as delighting to find their master. What she wanted now was, not someone who would be her master, but someone who would take control of the situation and who would know what he wanted and make sure of having it—so long as it was what she wanted too!

"It is perfectly hateful," she fumed to herself, "when a man doesn't know what to do. What a woman likes is not a man who 'masters' her, but a man who takes charge of the situation. *I* can't ask him to kiss me and say no more about it—what a fool I should feel! I suppose

women always hate having to do those downright kind of things; but if he were not an utter fool, he would just kiss me and shut me up from saying anything more about it. He will be awfully difficult to live with if he is so finickin and sensitive. It doesn't suit a man, somehow; they have no business to poach on our part of the business. Men ought to be rougher and blunter. Good gracious, what a face! He looks as if he were going to execution."

A little desultory conversation ensued, followed by another lapse into gloom. Maisie's patience gave out.

"Are you going through life with that graveside face?" she snapped pertly. "Isn't it enough to have made a goose of yourself once, without doing it permanently?"

If she had slapped his face it would not have surprised him more.

"I *beg* your pardon," he replied, with exaggerated politeness; "I am afraid I have been shockingly poor company."

He exerted himself to entertain her, reading idiotic extracts from the paper, telling her of incidents they recalled, giving her entertaining little observations he had made in the police-court, and joining with her in jubilant description of Admiral Burleigh, the parchmenty Dockyard detective, the melting *fiancée* of young Glanville and the excessively comic deportment of the three gentlemen who adorned the Bench. But he did not kiss her.

They dined at the Ritz and heard some good music; and he told her a variety of amusing and occasionally racy anecdotes about the other diners; and then drove her back to No. 29 in a taxi. But he did not kiss her.

He watched her tearful reception by Mrs. Fenton with a smile, and smoked a cigar by the fire in the back sitting-room—from which much of its adornment had been stripped—talking to her of all the things he knew so well and the places he had visited so often. Then he bade her good-night and said he would have to go to the office

in the morning, and would not see her until the evening. And still he did not kiss her.

And Maisie sat up till ever so late, staring angrily at the fire and saying over to herself all the objectionable things which she thought he was. And when he came home the next evening, it was to find a cool little note saying she had gone to pay a short visit to some old friends and would write from there and send him her address.

And that night it was Rookwood who sat up staring at the fire and saying uncomplimentary things about himself.

Mrs. Fenton told Maisie all about her father's departure, and Fenton's grief and her relief, and the letter they had received from Paris; and Maisie told her something about the Hôtel Bienfait. On asking after Lord Johnny, she was told that he also had gone away for a time, on a visit to his own place at Aldbury, during the absence on the Continent of the wife he disliked. He had seemed "terrible upset," had his lordship; and such a burning and a posting as he had had before he started, you never.

"And when is the wedding to be, Miss Maisie dear?"

"I suppose pretty soon," replied Maisie, listlessly.

She got up restlessly and changed the conversation.

After Rookwood left her that evening, she made up her mind that she would break off her engagement. He was too punctilious; there was no life, no go, in him; existence with him would be a dirge, not a dance. And having made up her mind to this, a sudden memory came unbidden of the blueness of his eyes. It stirred her strangely, like his deep voice did. How she could have loved him, if he had been different!

She tried to devise improvements for him, but she could not imagine him rowdy or flippant, nor could she

figure him brutal or overbearing. Something between these was what she wanted. It was not that she wanted him to laugh more; his laugh was enchanting, a lift of his upper lip, a flash of strong teeth and a glint of those blue eyes through narrowed lashes; you could not well improve on that. He talked ever so well. He was very handsome. He was evidently good and honest and not what she had thought him in her mad attack of universal suspicion. She wanted more devil in him; but she did not want a nasty devil. "It all comes to this," she thought, "he is shy. It isn't natural, or proper, for men to be shy. I wish he were bolder, or something-er. I want him, ever so much. All day to-morrow without seeing him . . . !"

After which semi-confession, she worked herself into a state of sentiment about Rookwood, which incontinently changed to a white-hot anger next morning, when the front-door banged and she realized he had gone off for the day without a word to her.

"Very well," she remarked, ominously, to herself. "Very well. All right, Mr. Rookwood. If you can go off like that, I can too."

So she wrote a line to Aunt Ellen, breaking the bad news, and minimizing it as much as possible, in affectionate terms; and a warm and grateful letter to Mrs. Simpson. Then she packed her things and sent for a taxi, drawing up at the nearest post-office on her way to the terminus to send a wire to Miss Stutchberry, "Expect me this evening."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BOND

MAISIE got out at the familiar station where she had said farewell to so many of the Young Gentlewomen, on their departure for the ancestral and other homes unknown to Maisie. The platforms looked a little less spacious, the offices a trifle shrunken. There was a bustling crowd thronging the exits; and under the clock a recognizable prim figure, towards which Maisie darted with her dressing-bag and her rug.

"Oh, Miss Stutchberry! How nice of you to come. It *is* so lovely and homey to come back and find you here."

Miss Stutchberry's response was of a dignified warmth; and presently they repaired to the premises Maisie had left more than three years before with such high hopes and romantic notions.

Mrs. Stutchberry was equally gracious, and made Maisie welcome. The sisters looked worn and aged, thought Maisie; and there was an anxious pucker in the placid brow of the younger woman. The High-class Establishment was short of a maid; and the bounteous fires of old days were visibly curtailed. The table, too, lacked several of the small indulgences that used to adorn the Stutchberry meals.

"We are putting you in the small room, Maisie," explained Mrs. Stutchberry, "because we are expecting Mrs. Macleod the day after to-morrow."

This seemed excellent news to Maisie, whose spirits were rising every moment. She called the sisters "poor

old dears" in her thoughts, and determined to do what she could to be a comfort to them. After putting her things away in the little room, she took possession of the dirty silver and china and resolutely put Miss Stutchberry out of the pantry.

"I am going to be domestically scientific like I used to be," she cried, gaily. "You sit down and be real ladies and let me look after you again. You don't know how I shall enjoy it."

At nine o'clock, with everything put away and the fire made up and the hearth swept, Maisie sat on a stool between the sisters and began to tell them things. Their relative positions seemed to be reversed; to Maisie, after all her vagabondage, they no longer seemed immensely older and wiser, but more like simple innocent "old dears" to whom she was vastly superior in experience and worldly knowledge. She had also at some period of the evening shed the reserve of pride that had made her hate to think of letting these good ladies know of her failure. All that had melted away, and she only had the longing to tell them everything, in the certain knowledge that they would understand.

After all, they had brought her up. It was they who had trained and taught her, and if anyone knew her it was surely these two. And they had believed in her when others doubted; and the desperate longing she cherished, to be believed and trusted after all the months of misunderstanding, had broken down the barriers of pride.

With her father and mother and their friends, it was her virtue that got her suspected and disliked. With Rookwood and Aunt Ellen, it was her supposed lapse into temptation. These dear good souls neither doubted nor misunderstood, nor disapproved; they knew. It made it all so simple, and Maisie rushed into the fullest explanations.

"I want to tell you everything," she burst out. "You

don't know how perfectly awful it has been, and you can't think what it meant when I got your letter saying you knew it was quite impossible I should have done anything criminal. I only got it after I was discharged. The police kept it until then; but I was oh! so glad. You were the only people who believed in me."

Miss Stutchberry glowed with modest and becoming virtue, but tried to look unassuming, as if it ill became her to accept praise for what was so much her nature. The sisters had posed for so long as lofty and highminded souls, that it had become quite easy to look on themselves in that light.

Maisie poured out her tale. The hotel and Papa Rouxel and De Marinde, and her mother and the gambling and young Torrance; the Hôtel Bienfait and Mme. Binon, and M. Robert and her mother's death. But she did not say anything of Sefton.

Then she told of Aunt Ellen and her "nutmeg-grater," and the Boss and her father, and Lord Johnny, and the arrest and the trial—suppressing only the names of the officials. And she also told of Rookwood, and what a stupid and unsatisfactory person he was. And still she said nothing of Sefton.

The amazing story fairly took the sisters' breath away. They dropped their knitting and asked endless questions and probed problems and propounded social puzzles, and altogether spent a most enjoyable evening; and ended up by saying:

"What in the world will Mrs. Macleod think? You must tell it all over again when she comes!" But still there was nothing said about Sefton.

The next day, Maisie set to work to make herself doubly useful. She had a field-day in the sitting-room and pantry, turned out the store cupboards, and went through the linen. After a twelve-hours' day of wholly meritorious activity, she settled down again on the stool

between the sisters, and her grave face arrested their attention after a long silence.

"What are you thinking about, child?" asked Mrs. Stutchberry. "You look worried."

Maisie did not answer.

"You must not let yourself dwell too much on what is past and what cannot be helped," said Miss Stutchberry, with kind if prim intention. "I cannot think of anything more distressing for a young woman on the threshold of life than to start with such experience of what is base and such memories of father and mother. I can imagine how infinitely painful it must be. But you, my dear, have come through it as not one in a dozen—not one in five hundred—could have done; and we see you here, unaltered, fresh, girlish, useful, capable, generous; without one good instinct chilled or blighted by your sorrows and disappointments; and we cannot but feel that not only you may be very proud and thankful to have been endowed with such a wholesome nature, but that we too may have a share in the pride; for beyond doubt you learned here, from us, under Providence, how to walk in the ways of probity and self-respect."

Maisie turned to her with a sudden smile.

"You have been perfect angels," she declared. "I owe you more than I can ever pay. And don't think for a moment that I am going to go on brooding, and letting myself get morbid. I was beginning to get like that, I think, just for a bit, but it all seemed to go the moment I got back here. You have done me all the good in the world, letting me come and pour it all over you. But there is something I haven't told you yet; and I do not know what it may lead to."

She took a small pocket-book from her dress and opened it.

"I told you about the man who took charge of the gambling at Mont Roselle. Well, I got to like him very

much indeed." Her voice in spite of herself grew husky and indistinct. "At first I hoped he was going to marry my mother; then I—thought him too good for that. He and I became very great friends, and it was a dreadful shock to find out what he was really like. At Paris, it came out that he was really the husband of this Lola Mount, and they lived together, and are called M. and Mme. Bienfait by everybody. He always seemed . . . as if he were trying to protect me from some of the worst things; and he tried very hard to get me to promise to keep away from my father. I thought it was simply because he did not want my father to know he had a part ownership in the hotel; and something worse than that, that my father might have taken revenge for. Well, when I was coming away, he saw me to the station, and he gave me *this,* and told me that if all else failed me, the . . . the lady whose name was here would be good to me for his sake!"

With hands that shook a little Maisie unfolded the scrap of crumpled paper; in silence the sisters waited and watched. After one deep snatched breath, no word of exclamation escaped them.

Maisie handed the scrap to Mrs. Stutchberry. She took it and held it, for a brief space, without looking at it. Then through her glasses she read the few scribbled words, and with an inarticulate sound handed it to her sister.

"Will you describe this man?" asked Miss Stutchberry, presently, after a silence that to Maisie seemed to have lasted years. Her voice quavered oddly.

"He is over fifty," said Maisie in low tones; "tall, very straight and rather slight, with a small head. He has an easy way of sitting, and nearly always puts one hand between his crossed knees. His eyes are more green than blue, but a bit grey too, and his hair is very

thick and curls. It is grey. He has good teeth, very small, and good features—and a very soft, gentle voice. I do not think I ever heard him speak loud . . . His ears are very small."

"Did you say," asked Mrs. Stutchberry, with a desperate struggle for composure, "that he was . . . married to this woman Lola Mount?"

Maisie nodded.

"I found out, purely by an accident but not in any way because they were hiding it—all the hotel knew it, it seems, but me—that they were sharing the same suite; and I said something about its being disgraceful." The scarlet colouring was staining Maisie's face violently at the recollection. "And Mrs. Sefton made me feel very bad by telling me he was her husband."

"Mrs. ———?"

"Sefton. That was his name. Jim Sefton. He . . . had been in prison—penal servitude. It was there that he knew my father. My father did not know so much about him as he knew about my father. He knew my mother when she was trying to get rid of my father, and she told him that my father had committed a dreadful crime and that there was a reward of five hundred pounds offered for information. My mother and the man she wanted to have instead of my father were keeping Mr. Sefton then from starvation; and partly for that—to oblige them—and partly because he wanted money so badly, he gave the information and my father was arrested and condemned. My mother told me that, in a rage, when she was dying."

There was another long silence which Maisie dared not break. There was some depth here she could not plumb—some mystery. She felt awe-stricken.

The silence was broken by the deep sobs of Mrs. Stutchberry, who was hurried to her room by her sister, leaving Maisie appalled at what she had done.

Late into the night she lay listening to the stifling sobs of age. All next day Mrs. Stutchberry went about her duties in an unnatural silence, her livid eyelids alone testifying to the storm that had raged, making Maisie feel like the criminal she had been suspected of being. Miss Stutchberry's lips were pressed together in stern self-command. Towards tea-time Mrs. Macleod arrived, but had scarcely bestowed her astonished greetings on Maisie when she was snatched away to Mrs. Stutchberry's bedroom, from which she emerged, much later, looking deeply troubled.

Mrs. Stutchberry did not appear again that night, and Miss Stutchberry went to bed early; there was no sitting over the fire, which was allowed to go out. But Maisie was called to Mrs. Macleod's room, after a silent supper overshadowed with gloom; and there, in their dressing gowns, with their hair loosened, the mystery was unfolded.

"I suppose you know," began Mrs. Macleod, after a period of hair-brushing, "that the news you gave Mrs. Stutchberry yesterday was of a most distressing kind?"

"I imagine so," replied the puzzled Maisie, "but of course I have not the least idea why."

"She has asked me to tell you," said Mrs. Macleod, gravely. "It is not a very pleasant thing to have to do, but she wishes it."

She remained lost in thought for a moment.

"This man you spoke of—Sefton?" Maisie nodded, a flood of scarlet leaping to her face.

"He is Mrs. Stutchberry's husband."

Mrs. Macleod suddenly seemed to have retreated to a great distance, and the things she was saying did not seem to be real things. They were wild and senseless; but presently, Maisie thought, she would get the key to them.

"He was a great deal younger than she was, and she

married him against the wish of her people. His people knew she had money and thought she would look after him and keep him straight. Unfortunately she trusted him with her money; and when she was reduced to keeping school for a living, his sister joined her, as she said, to try to make some honourable reparation for the wrong her family had done.

"He deserted her eventually; but after two years wrote asking her for money and explaining that he had come into collision with the law and was staying abroad so as not to bring disgrace on her. She sent him money, in the name of Sefton. Later on she heard he was in England, and when she got in touch with him he represented to her that he had not dared come near her, for fear he should run the risk of being identified with the James Stutchberry who had disappeared but who was still wanted by the police, for some fraudulent affair or other. So she never saw him after that, but sent him money to keep him, as he said, from sliding into the gutter. Then he wrote her, saying he was cornered at last and would probably get a long sentence and that she had better not try to communicate with him as, once more, it would increase his risk of being charged with the old affair. She saw in the papers that he had a five years' sentence; and after that ran out, he went to France, writing to ask for money, and saying he had a chance of a good business engagement. He wrote pretty often and quite hopefully, always alluding to the time when she would join him. She lived for nothing else. Then she got a letter from some Frenchman, saying that Mr. Sefton had been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment in France, for a crime he had not committed, but that he could not give away the man who had really committed it, because he was consumptive and had a large family. She exalted him into a hero then, and has worked and stinted herself to help him when

he came out, ever since. His term might have been up about eighteen months now, and she has been expecting to see him or hear from him—has lived on the hope—and was wearing herself to death with anxiety. Mrs. Stutchberry lives only to express her gratitude and affection for such devotion and sacrifice. It is one of the most pathetic stories of pure devotion to a scoundrel; and now you come, introduced by him, with this shameful tale. Can you imagine what she feels like?"

Whatever Mrs. Stutchberry may have been feeling, it hardly could have exceeded the poignancy of what Maisie herself felt as this recital came to an end. She drank the cup of humiliation to the very dregs. The man she had loved, with a torturing passion, who had kissed her and spoilt all other love for her, was Mrs. Stutchberry's husband. *Mrs. Stutchberry!* This old, withered woman; and she still loved him. Imagine Jim Sefton—imagine him leaving Maisie, or blooming Lola Mount, to come back to *Mrs. Stutchberry!* There was a loathsomely comic side to it—a comedy that made you sick instead of making you laugh—a ghastly travesty of the comic. It was indecent.

Suppose she—Maisie—had gone away with Jim Sefton and *married* him, as for one brief space had been quite on the cards—it had been in both their minds—she would have been involved in a case of bigamy, with *Mrs. Stutchberry* for the injured wife! What a rival for Maisie, with her vivid youth; what a tragedy for the older woman . . . And Lola, she supposed, was not married to him at all; that had been pure bluff. It was not in the least likely that two such knowing birds would put themselves in reach of the law for a trifle like the respectability of marriage! The story of the French prison was bluff too; it was in England he had been in prison, and quite recently; that yarn must have been got up just to shake off his wife without really breaking with

her. And yet, he had sent Maisie to her to take shelter . . . what utter confidence in his wife's love, and what a proof of his queer crooked love for Maisie . . .

She felt utterly broken and crushed by this last disaster. To get away, to the ends of the earth, to flee where no one would know her, to hide from all familiar eyes, was a crying need. And yet she had to stay there, to sit quiet, to hide all emotion, to prevent at all costs either Mrs. Macleod or the Stutchberrys from knowing or guessing the full extent of the catastrophe. Mrs. Macleod would discuss it—*was* discussing it—she would be asked questions; she must not give herself away.

With a tremendous effort Maisie tried to pull herself together and answer Mrs. Macleod's question.

"What is the address of this hotel where they are living?"

Of course she knew that. It was the Hôtel Bienfait, Rue Voie de l'Aiguille; but instead of answering to that effect, she found herself saying:

"So that was the great bond between them—Jim Sefton. Jim Sefton!"

Mrs. Macleod looked at her sharply; but not for a moment did it enter her head, no matter how oddly the girl looked or behaved, that there had been sentimental passages between Maisie and Mr. Stutchberry.

"Yes," she answered. "That was the bond; a strong one and a true. Will you give me the address, my dear?"

How Maisie hated giving it!

CHAPTER XXX

THE SISTER'S CURSE

THAT night, Maisie counted her rapidly diminishing cash. She had only about £15 left, to keep her until she found work, or married Rookwood. It was out of the question to stay here; she must make up her mind what she was going to do. With the question still undecided, she fell asleep; and next morning after breakfast, was summoned to Mrs. Stutchberry's room.

Mrs. Stutchberry was in bed. Maisie was shocked to see the change in her. It was evident she had suffered a heavy blow.

In a strained husky voice the sick woman addressed her as she stood by the bed.

"I want you to know, Maisie, that I look upon this as a sacred trust."

"This" was the scrap of crumpled paper.

"My dear, you must consider this your home. He knew it would be so, and he would wish it to be so. You will be very useful, so you need not think it a favour. I want to ask you, please not to talk to others of what you know; I would like it forgotten. I do not want it talked about; he might come home and it would be against him. He might come home . . ."

Her voice trailed off into silence.

The worn face looked strangely transparent and clean-cut. The eyelids were sunken and darkened, the lips colourless. Maisie thought she looked terribly ill.

Creeping out of the room, she met Miss Stutchberry red-eyed and grim.

"She is very ill," faltered Maisie, feeling guilty and miserable.

"She fainted last night," answered Miss Stutchberry. "I shall want you to help me. She must be nursed carefully."

Once more Maisie felt trapped; tangled up in a web of circumstances.

* * * *

Slowly Mrs. Stutchberry failed and faded; silently she let herself slide down the path from which there is no return. Uncomplainingly, and as a gentlewoman, she accepted and even welcomed the encroaching weakness that left her dependent on others for every small service. "It will not be for long," she quietly informed Mrs. Macleod.

Her eyes followed Maisie appealingly; and the girl guessed, with throbbing heart, what that appeal meant. She resisted it for days; then wrote to Sefton. She addressed the letter to *Monsieur le Patron,* Hôtel Bienfait, with the superscription *"Personnel,"* in the French fashion, so that it should be delivered to no one but the person to whom it was addressed. In it she said:—

"Dear Mr. Sefton,

You gave me your wife's address when I left Paris; and I came to her when I was in great trouble. I do not think you knew that she was my old school-mistress. She is now dying; and I want you to come over and see her before she goes. It would make it easier for her, and she has had a very unhappy time. Please do this; I do not think you will refuse, and the end seems very near now.

Sincerely yours,
Maisie Pleydell.

I do not think you will be so heartless as to refuse."

Under the influence of self-reproach she wrote also to Rookwood:

"Dear Anthony,

I am afraid I have treated you very unkindly in keeping you waiting so long for a letter. My excuse is that I am, again, in the midst of very great trouble. I came to my old school-mistresses; and brought trouble with me; and Mrs. Stutchberry is dying, we are afraid. It is more sad than I can tell you yet.

Please do not come to see me until I write again. I am being well looked after and am also useful, as there is a great deal I can do for my old friends in their trouble. I hope you are well.

Yours in haste,

Maisie."

This letter, hinting at fresh entanglements, put Rookwood beside himself with anxiety. He felt more like going out and getting drunk and having a row than he had ever felt in his life. The other letter, duly handed to the *Patron* of the Hôtel Bienfait, was read by Sefton in the office. There was no one there to see his face as he scanned the first lines.

Lola, meeting him as he went to the cellary, caught hold of his arm and twisted him round to the light.

"What devil has got into you now?" she asked, lightly, but with real curiosity. "You look the very impersonation of envy-hatred-malice-and-all-uncharitableness."

He wrenched himself away with some muttered swear-words, and she laughed after him, "Cross-patch!"

The swing-door closed on his drawn and pain-stricken face, wrung with the suddenly-sprung temptation.

In the room where Rips had lain dead, Dick the Toff was securely established. It had been converted into a handsome smoking-room and study, Maisie's little white

room with the opalescent frieze being his bedroom. He slipped unquestioned into the position of secretary, and proved efficient and punctilious, keeping himself to himself and exacting freedom from interference so long as he neglected no work. He proved an admirable caterer, but had inaugurated his tenancy with an orgy of an unprintable character and had snubbed Lola with cold ferocity when she remonstrated. Jim Sefton knew it was going to be a stubborn fight for mastery, and did not mean to yield an inch to this evil creature whom even the worst men thought bad.

He hated seeing Pleydell in the suite Maisie had occupied; loathed hearing him talk of the "dirty trick" she had played him and his confederates—and still more to think of what Maisie's sufferings must have been. The law of self-preservation had held him back from seeking Maisie so long as there had been a chance of finding her father in her company; but now he found himself saddled with the man whom of all men he hated, and still deprived of Maisie.

He had never ceased to long for her, to go over all that had happened, to curse himself for letting her slip from his influence, to plan out how he might have worked it differently had he only realized in time how great her hold on his heart would prove. It was Lola who had been the stumbling block. With Lola his material interests were bound up; but the more he longed for Maisie the more he shrank from the other woman.

The thought of seeing Maisie again drew him unrelentingly. The unfortunate knowledge she had gained of his affairs was brushed aside; he would see her. It never entered his head to think of a trap, as a less shrewd and more cunning man might have done; he only thought he would see her. All day it hummed in his brain; he would see her.

He packed his bag when Lola was upstairs in one of

the *appartements,* and took it to the cellary. A letter telling her he would be away a day or two was put on Lola's dressing-table; he slipped out at dusk, and got away unseen. It was not a long journey; that night, part of next day; then he would see her; he would see her; he would see her.

* * * *

Jim Sefton stood in front of the fire in Mrs. Stutchberry's sober, well-ordered sitting-room. With its handsome reproductions of good pictures, its suitable furniture, its spotless cleanliness, and comfort, it might have made a strong appeal to the homeless vagabond who had been a gaol bird. But Sefton had in his mind's eye other rooms, rooms where there was nothing handsome, massive or valuable, but made bright and gay by Maisie's happy fancy and home-craft. The grave orderliness of this cultured abode oppressed him; he moved impatiently and stretched his head back—a long lean figure, grey, keen-faced, with brooding frown and watchful eyes. As he shifted his position jerkily, the door opened and Miss Stutchberry came in.

Sefton had forgotten all about his sister. Her presence came upon him with a shock that entirely deprived him of self-possession. The two stared at each other, one in a mental confusion that made words appear futile, the other in a silence bred of steadfast anger and contempt. There was no family likeness between them save a fleeting expression given by the set of the mouth. Miss Stutchberry lacked the distinction of her brother's appearance; she was short and decidedly tubby, although she held herself well and made the best of her undignified proportions. She dominated the situation now, and was the first to speak.

"Your wife wishes to see you—very much against my advice."

Sefton bowed.

"She knows—the information was sprung on her—that you are living with another woman. I must ask you to bear in mind that she is ill"—the inflexible voice shook the least little bit—"very ill. We do not expect her to recover. She has had trouble with her heart for some years now, and this—has broken her."

She paused to recover her control; then went on inexorably.

"You, of course, are the cause of it all, your flagrant dishonesty and infidelity. I hold you entirely responsible for the wreck of this fine, self-sacrificing life. As you have dealt by her, so I hope, and trust, and believe, will fate deal by you. I hope—if hoping be of the least use in a scheme of the wildest injustice—that you may never know another happy or peaceful day, and that the torment you have inflicted on her may never be absent day or night from your path."

"Amen," responded Sefton, with a sardonic bow. He had recovered himself.

"If you will come this way——" said Miss Stutchberry, going to the door; and he followed her.

Mrs. Stutchberry was propped high on the pillows. Her breathing was laboured and the sickly yellow of her face was broken by the bluish tint of her lips and the dull red patches on her cheek-bones. At sight of Jim Sefton she flushed darkly.

"Well?" he asked, with gentle raillery, as he leant over her and kissed her forehead lightly; "here I am, Rachel. Why did you not let me know sooner that you were so ill?"

Oh! That soft way of his! Had she ever been able to resist it?

"What can I do for you, now I am here?"

"Stay," was all she could say, fighting against the gathering tears.

"Of course," he retorted, playfully, "and what else? Shall I begin by making up the fire?"

He sat with her till she dozed off; and then went out. In the evening he sat with her again; her temperature was rising and made her restless and excitable, but gave her an appearance of having revived. He told her in his quiet frank way of his life in prison, of the difficulty of shaking off would-be "pals" when he came out, of the good turns served him by the Boss, describing the Vaults in a comic yet realistic way that made her laugh; of Rips and Lola, and how they fed and housed him.

"Of course you know about her?" he asked, carelessly. "I drifted into it, you know, like I drifted into everything —like I might drift into anything; it is my doom——" He laughed a careless little laugh, and she murmured:

" 'Unstable as water' . . ."

"That's it," he said, cheerfully. "Poor old Reuben—that's me. And I couldn't face you, you know, after that. There are limits to my blackguardism."

Oh! He had got round her all right! Would there be any money in it, he wondered?

She fell asleep again; and woke up towards midnight. The doctor was hurriedly sent for, and a serious rise in temperature subdued for the time, leaving her, however, so much weaker.

All this time Sefton had not seen Maisie. His impatience was setting him on edge.

Coming into the sitting-room next day he asked his sister, abruptly:

"Where is Miss Pleydell?"

"Upstairs," answered Miss Stutchberry; adding, "is it any business of yours?"

"Quite possibly," he retorted. "Anyway, I am going to look for her."

Now, Miss Stutchberry knew of no reason why Maisie should shun Sefton's presence except his treatment of

his wife and his giving Maisie an introduction to her under such circumstances. So she made no particular effort to stop his quest, feeling pretty sure that Maisie would "give him a piece of her mind" that might astonish him.

"I hope you will like it when you do find her," was all she said.

Maisie knew of Sefton's presence, but had not been able to bring herself to face him. She hoped to see him and dreaded to see him, hungered curiously to see him and to know if he still had power to move her; but most of all she loathed the idea of seeing him as Mrs. Stutchberry's husband. The thought of Rookwood troubled her greatly. She tried to dismiss him into some dim recess of memory, until she could be sure of her feeling for him. Sefton had complete dominance for the moment. Not in love, actually; but in fear of love. She could not tell yet what the extent of his influence might be. She felt hot gusts of anger sweep over her as she thought of the advantage he had taken of her ignorance of his affairs; it was an unpardonable outrage, yet she was miserably conscious she might be glad to find an excuse for pardoning it.

Her lip had curled in scorn when Miss Stutchberry told her of the pathetic and silent forgiveness at the bedside of the deeply wronged woman. Maisie would not think of it as pathetic, only as preposterous. In her heart she did not feel that Mrs. Stutchberry's wrongs were as poignant as her own; and she let her heart harden, with contempt for the woman and anger against the man. And amidst all was a trembling, frenzying anxiety that she would not be bold enough or self-possessed enough to make an opportunity for meeting him and that he would go away without her seeing him.

Then he came to her.

She was sewing, a table beside her was littered with

towels, pillow-cases, and tray-cloths. Little tapes, with "Stutchberry" in red working, were being sewn on to each article. Back to her memory in a vivid flash came the recollection, that she had been putting tapes with "Sefton" worked in red, on towels and pillow-cases the day she found a crumpled pyjama suit hanging across Lola's bed. Her face flamed scarlet at the thought. Sefton thought the blush was for him.

Maisie raised her eyes and looked at him steadily. Her father's nerve and breeding stood her in good stead; it was from him she had inherited the instinct that taught her how to act in tight places.

"How is Mrs. Stutchberry?" she asked.

"Bad," answered Sefton, gravely; "very bad. Why did you tell her? Could you not have spared her that?"

"Hardly, under the circumstances," retorted Maisie, with an aplomb equal to his own.

He lounged against the mantelpiece, hands in his pockets, back to the fire, one heel tilted up behind him on the fender.

"I am very grieved that it was this particular matter that brought her to this state," he said, "but I cannot sham any other kind of grief. A man who marries a woman thirteen years older than himself——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"And a woman who marries a man thirty years older than herself——" broke in Maisie, impulsively, and immediately regretting her indiscreet impulse.

"Is there likely to be such a woman?" breathed Sefton.

"No!" cried Maisie, as if putting some dreadful thought away.

"Why not?" pursued the soft voice, nearer to her ear.

"Because," said Maisie, in one concentrated effort to hurt and baffle him, "I am going to marry an honest man—without a wife, or wives; with no disparities——"

She broke off, almost choking with rage at the thought of how easy he had believed it to whistle her back.

She had her revenge. She looked him squarely in the eyes as she fired her shot, and saw his face transformed. Something so malign, so vicious, so *old,* came across it, that she felt his spell over her to be finally broken. And the blue, true glint of Rookwood's eyes, and the deep vibration of his voice—so different from the low silken purr of the man beside her—came back unbidden to nerve and steel her soul. Sefton's power over her was gone, she hoped for good.

At first he could not believe it. He tried every wile, used every device. She was wooden under his touch, not even shrinking from it; she looked him in the face, her eyes meeting his coldly. And when, losing hold of himself a little, he besought her to tell him what had happened, she said:

"You are Mr. Stutchberry, not Mr. Sefton. There is no such person, really, as the man I thought I knew. Your wife was my school-mistress; you are *her* contemporary, not mine. The thought of you—by her bed—where you once had your place—makes it seem—grotesque, and—and—indecent. I seem to have woke up from a—nasty dream. I suppose lots of people are silly like I was, when they first think themselves grown-up!"

She punished him worse with each phrase and sentence; and when he said, in vicious anger:

"Who is this man? Best keep him from coming across my path!" the look of real fear in her eyes stabbed him like a dagger.

Miss Stutchberry interrupted the *tête-à-tête,* and Sefton became sarcastically polite.

"Have you any message for your father?" he asked.

"No, thank you," Maisie answered.

"Nor Lola?"

Silence.

"Well, I shall be here another day or two, in case you change your mind," he said, in a voice full of meaning that in former days would have thrilled Maisie through and through. Her mind was filled, now, with the possibility of danger for Rookwood at the hands of this unscrupulous man; and all on account of her. It was a wretched thought, and disquieting, for if Rookwood came to harm through her, after his goodness to her, life would be blank indeed.

Maisie would not give Sefton another opportunity of speaking to her alone. She was much with the dying woman, and no longer looked with anything but mild disdain on the juxtaposition of the two as husband and wife. Sefton ground his teeth over that.

He announced his departure for a certain day; and Maisie wired to Rookwood to come down that evening. Mrs. Stutchberry, however, took a turn for the worse; and Sefton stayed to "see it through," as he hoped to himself. It was too late to wire to Rookwood when Maisie found out that Sefton was staying.

The Young Gentlewomen had all been sent home, and their parents informed that the school would not reopen. Maisie had made herself more than useful, relieving Miss Stutchberry of a load of work and detail. A batch of letters had been registered and sent off; and Maisie was returning home in the soft moist dusk, when she ran into Rookwood coming out of the station and signalling vainly for a taxi.

"It is only a step; shall we not walk?" she said, at his elbow.

"Maisie!"

The deep voice rang very true and tender, and so exultingly glad. A hand was slipped into her arm, and they strode step for step through the dusk and the glimmering intermittent lights. The bright arc lamp above

the school gate entrance shone full on them as Sefton looked out of his wife's bedroom window before lowering the blind; and he saw the two figures very close together, Maisie tilting her chin in the gesture he knew so well; and the man beside her bending his head and drawing her a little closer to his side as they moved with swinging strides out of the light into the darkness.

Sefton was shaken with savage rage. The sickness of suspense held him, and the maddening torment of jealousy. His sister's curse lay heavy on his head already.

Half an hour later he left the house.

Back to France he carried his gnawing regret and anger. Maisie's tilted chin, the man's broad shoulders and bending head, came across his vision everlastingly, making him sick with rage. Lola could not cope with his evil tempers, and an estrangement, different from all their previous tiffs, sprang up between them. The hotel business went smoothly and safely and was well patronized; the two *patrons,* scoundrels each, gave good value for all they got and were greatly admired by their *clientèle.* The lean grey Englishmen, with their impenetrable reserve, their cool self-possession, and their undoubted business ability, were voted *chic, très chic,* and *pas possible d'être plus gentleman,* by some, and *types farouches* by others; they were certainly an asset in every way to a high-class business. But under all the success and the prosperity, the sense of defeat and humiliation lay heavily on Jim Sefton, and the hunger for Maisie's face and Maisie's kisses devoured him. He grew more and more grey and lean and silent and wolfish; more and more difficult to maintain intimate terms with; until Lola abandoned the attempt to re-establish the old footing in despair.

Lola had never shaken off her rankling jealousy of Maisie, but in this case she had no notion that Sefton had been anywhere where he would have met the girl.

It was not until the day that she saw Maisie's wedding in the paper that she knew anything about the visit.

They were in the office, going into some matters of business, when Lola opened the English paper.

"Your daughter is married," she informed Pleydell.

"I wish the man joy of her," sneered Pleydell.

Sefton turned on him with a gesture so menacing that both he and Lola started in surprise.

"Don't let me hear you say anything like that again," said Sefton, in his softest voice.

"Are you one of her—victims?" asked Pleydell, with such an insulting insinuation in the pause that Lola expected to see him brained on the spot.

"Look to yourself, Pleydell, if you force that kind of quarrel on me," returned Sefton. "And don't speak of your daughter in my hearing like that again. I can give you points and a thundering good hiding, if it comes to fighting or wrestling; and I'd break your damned neck without a scruple."

Pleydell subsided; but Lola took up the cudgels.

"Is there anthing so specially precious about Maisie that one must not speak of her?" she asked, flippantly.

"She is too good to be spoken of here," answered Sefton. "Don't try and work up a row, my girl; you will be the sorriest of the two, if you do."

"We flatter ourselves," chanted Lola; "such a lady-killer as we are!"

"Don't be vulgar, if you can help it," retorted Sefton. And then added:

"It is a pity to waste a good quarrel on a matter of this sort. You had much better know how things are. Maisie cared for me almost enough to come away with me, after she knew I was a crook; but not enough to come away with me after she thought you were my wife. I cared enough for her, when she left here, to give her

the address of my wife—in case she should be in need of a decent woman's help."

There was no mistaking the sensation this created.

"I cared for her enough," went on Sefton, "to go to my wife's death-bed because Maisie asked me. I saw her with this man—I hope he is a better fellow than I am . . . If either of you want a row with me, you know the way to go to get it."

Lola brooded over this outbreak and the cause of it. It robbed her of her last hope of getting Sefton back.

Of the three partners, Pleydell was the least displeased with his lot. He did not care for Paris; he much preferred London and hankered after Fenton and Fenton's back-room and the friendly club where he met such travelled and amusing company. But Paris had its points; and he had a car now, and by-and-by would have a really handsome one.

It amused him to see the stony face Sefton turned to that handsome piece who was so crazy about him. It amused him to listen to Lola's fleers, that fell harmlessly on the armour-plated indifference of the weary, soul-tortured man. It amused him to see her attempts to rouse jealously by coquetting with him, Pleydell. And it amused him to play with the idea of taking her on as his mistress . . . only if he did, by heaven, she had better not let him catch her harking back.

It amused him still more, later on, when Mrs. Stutchberry died, and Miss Stutchberry sent a notice to the Paris papers, notifying James Stutchberry or Sefton of his wife's demise. If Sefton and Lola had been married, it would have been a handy weapon to blackmail them with, he thought, with a grin. They were too alert to have let themselves in for that.

Lola read this news also. It struck her dumb.

Jim's wife, whom he had gone to see when she was

dying, Maisie's old school-mistress! Good heavens! How extraordinary.

She went with the paper in her hand to the office near the cellary.

"Have you seen your wife's death?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Sefton.

"Did you know she was Maisie's old school-mistress?"

"Yes."

"What an extraordinary thing!"

"Yes?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" mimicked Lola. "Is that all you can say?"

"Yes."

She looked at him in impotent rage.

"Perhaps you would find something more to say if I told that other reptile that you were the 'nark' that got him his fifteen years."

Sefton took her by the shoulders and put her out of his office.

"Go and tell him now," he said.

It is impossible to give any idea of the atmosphere of hatred and suspicion that brooded over this calamitous household, and that raged in the hearts of the three *patrons*. Outwardly the business throve and throve, clients came again and again, no untoward events marred the smooth progress of the business Bienfait, and *les trois Anglais* who managed it with so much success and discretion were considered models of what such *patrons* should be. And it brought neither pleasure nor content, for all its profits, to the sordid souls who watched and hated and intrigued against each other. Pleydell looked forward to the day when he would annex Lola and the principal share in the concern; Lola waited for a chance to penetrate Sefton's cold indifference to her love or hate; and Sefton retired daily deeper and deeper into his

morose silence and detachment. Warped and seared by evil passions and disillusionment, the curse pronounced by his sister lay heavy on his head.

Wrapped in a loneliness none attempted to disturb, he noted little of what went on, unconnected with the business side of his life. He did not know the moment at which Lola, acting on a burning impulse which she regretted to the last day of her life, threw herself into Pleydell's arms. His only recognition of the fact, when it faced him, was to remove his effects from the suite and to have Pleydell's shifted into it when he was out.

Pleydell returned from a drive and found his usual sitting-room locked. The hall attendant told him M. Sefftone had the key. Sefton was not in the cellary office, and Pleydell burst into Lola's suite, finding her there looking very white.

"Where's Sefton?" he asked.

"Out," answered Lola.

"Well, where in hell is my key? I can't get into my rooms."

"Jim has taken over your rooms, and had your things moved in here," said Lola, with trembling lips, but still with an attempt at bravado.

Pleydell stared; then laughed—a mean ruffianly laugh.

"Is that what you are on the verge of tears for?" he asked.

Then the tears came stormily.

Pleydell made no complaint, although he hoarded up a bitter grudge. He treated Lola as the whipping-boy for his grudge—treated her as such men generally treat such women—leading her the life of a dog. Bitterly she regretted her folly.

One evening, the chamberman-barber came hastily to the office wing. Sefton was sitting, idle and listless, in the little white room Maisie had occupied. He had hailed

the excuse to get Pleydell out of it with whatever of joy he was still capable of feeling.

"*Monsieur,*" panted the man, "*Monsieur Plédelle—Madame— Je crains qu'il ne lui ait fait du mal . . .*"

Sefton went swiftly. He burned to lay violent hands on Pleydell.

The scene in the sitting-room of Lola's suite was an ugly one. Pleydell stood at the fireplace, his face a concentration of evil. Lola's face was bleeding, and there was a basin on the dining table with some bloodied water in it, and a blood-stained towel, and a table-napkin in a similar condition. On the floor lay an empty soda-water bottle.

"What has happened?" asked Sefton, sharply.

"What has that got to do with you?" snarled Pleydell.

The maid, whom Lola had lately added to the staff, and who was sponging the torn face, cried out in indignant sympathy; the chamberman added his testimony; and Lola made some sobbing accusation. The staff hated Pleydell as much as they loved Sefton and Lola.

It did not take Sefton long to understand. Some more than usually blatant folly on Lola's part, some foolish attempt to rouse Pleydell's jealousy on the score of a Russian dandy who had bowed and grimaced and sent flowers and a *billet-doux*—and Pleydell had lain her face open with the soda-water bottle. The cut was a bad one, deep into her nose and lip; she would be permanently scarred.

After sending for the doctor, Sefton thrashed Pleydell, as he had often longed to do, until he too was glad to avail himself of the services of the doctor. A deeper gloom than ever settled down over the Hôtel Bienfait.

The curse lay heavy on them all.

CHAPTER XXXI

LOOSE ENDS

ANTHONY ROOKWOOD took Maisie's treatment of him almost as badly and childishly as she took his too diffident love-making. At the Bank he was absent-minded and irritable, and almost caused the resignation of one of the oldest clerks by calling him an idiot. He made as extraordinary an answer to a question which his uncle asked him about some bonds, and seemed so unconscious of having said anything unusual, that after he left the room the old gentleman took off his spectacles and looked sheepishly at the stolid and unmoved secretary at the other end of the room, for quite three minutes. Then, saying "Dear, dear," and "Tch, tch," to himself, he submissively looked up the information required for himself. On asking Anthony, later, whether he would not be better for a holiday, he found himself repelled with unnecessary heat, and told that holidays were the devil, they left you too much time . . . he didn't want to hear the word holiday. The wondering staff would have wondered more had they seen him at his lodgings, finding fault with the food, walking up and down incessantly, and staying out in the moonlight till two in the morning and then sleeping uneasily. He was in a state of mind he himself described as rotten and that only Mrs. Fenton understood.

On the receipt of Maisie's letter telling of more trouble he very nearly set off to find her; but lacking the courage, nearly got drunk instead. He smoked endlessly and chose the strongest brands; and then, when tired of

these forms of self-expression went in for the study of Japanese, with a view to asking for the immediate managership of the Tokio branch of the firm.

One evening, when inflaming his wounds with moonlight and solitude, he became conscious of footsteps that coincided with his own. For a space he knew it without noticing it; then his attention was caught.

The steps kept pace, a stride or so behind him. They were heavier than his own, and there were nails in the boots. The moon was behind a heavy cloud, and for the moment a dense blackness enwrapped the walkers. Their steps sounded clear and metallic on the broad and now deserted pavement of the Embankment, below the Cecil and Savoy Hotels.

Rookwood slowed down and gave the other man a chance to get abreast of him.

The figure in the reefer overcoat slowed too.

"I want to speak to you," he said, without further ado.

"I supposed so," answered Rookwood.

The other man's heavy breathing sounded hoarse and oppressed in the still night.

"Where is she?" he asked, suddenly, after a pause that was filled with suggestiveness.

"Do you mean Miss Peyton—I mean Miss Pleydell?" inquired Rookwood, who had by this time recognized a former acquaintance.

"Yes, I do. Where is she? Do you know where she is? Has that devil got her?"

The hoarse voice choked over the words. His throat would not let them come clear. He thrust his fingers into his neck-cloth and wrenched it looser.

"No! No, rather not. At least——" hastily began Rookwood, and then broke off, as a thought struck him.

"At least *what?* Can't you speak out?"

"She left here quite suddenly," began Rookwood, never questioning the other man's right to inquire. "She

went to her old school, where she was brought up. I heard from her once. She told me there was more trouble for her there; in fact, she seemed to imply that she had brought trouble upon her friends there too."

"What is their name?"

"Stutchberry, I believe."

"Stutchberry! Her friends? *Stutchberry!"*

"Do you know anything about them?"

"I know that the man who sent her to my place to find news of her father—he is a bird of much the same feather—is by his right name Stutchberry; James Stutchberry; and he has a deserted wife somewhere about. If by any chance she has taken them news of his doings, no doubt it would mean trouble—trouble all round!"

"Could he do her any harm?"

"Lord knows. I hardly think he would. It was the other one I was afraid of. I got it into my head he had decoyed or kidnapped her."

"You know what happened to him?"

The Boss nodded.

"He will not be allowed to come back to England; and the Paris political police will keep their eyes on him. You would probably like to know——" Anthony's heart warmed to the man, when he remembered the timely warning of Maisie's danger conveyed by him. "If it interests you—you have done a great deal to help Miss Pleydell—er . . . you will be glad to hear she is going to be my wife." Utter silence.

"I am in the fortunate position of being able to give her a comfortable home and keep her safe from all the blackguardism that has surrounded her. She won't be . . ."

Whatever it was that she would not be was not explained, for the Boss strode rapidly away into the darkness.

Rookwood never knew the fierce impulse that had

been resisted to strike him murderously; and it was not until long afterwards that he knew on what terms this man had parted with Maisie. Had he known that, there might have been murder done, that night, on the Embankment with the moon behind the huge black bank of cloud.

The Boss and Fenton foregathered, a night or two later, at the butler's pantry of the house in Portland Place. The butler had great uses for one who could dispose of goods of unusual kinds.

Fenton was sullen at not having heard again from Mr. Dick. The Boss was sullen after his encounter with Rookwood. Each put the other on edge by allusions to the painful subject, and the host had hard work to keep things smooth.

There were other matters, culled from the wealth of Lord Johnny's now denuded desk, which it was felt would repay a little careful manipulation. A working arrangement was fixed up, and steady profits anticipated. The Boss took charge of negotiations. He was giving up the Vaults—handing it over to Slim Jim as a going concern for a sum down, and retiring to the little place in the country, where he was going to start as a bookmaker. And as Rookwood would be leaving No. 29 on his marriage, his rooms had been bespoken by that young noodle, Lord Amory, who had been photoed in twenty-seven art poses and costumes and who had love-letters from dozens of society ladies. There ought to be money in *that*.

Matters became more friendly after this; and the Boss was invited to take a hot drink in the cosy basement kitchen. There, the whole story of Mr. Dick, and Sefton, and the blood-money, and the crime, were unfolded to the mutual surprise, edification, and entertainment of the trio.

The piece of business now under consideration was a

difficult one; and Dick the Toff was felt to be a loss. The Boss, who was a good linguist, undertook to handle it; and with every precaution that common sense and suspicion combined could suggest, repaired to Belgium armed with the information for which certain agents were prepared to bid against each other. It is to be presumed that, either they thought his terms extreme, or that one or other of the parties never had any intention of paying anything at all; for his body was found in a canal about four days after he landed across the Channel.

The body, and the clothes, were identified as those of a Mr. Arrowsmith, who had put up at a respectable commercial hotel, and whose home address was given as No. 29, Percy Street, London, S. W. No. 29 was requested to come over and give evidence; but the badly-frightened Fenton would not venture. The list of articles found on the corpse, and the papers among his luggage, did not include any of the matters about which he had intended to open negotiations; and the supposition, that the agents who required these matters of information were just as ready to secure them by robbery and murder as by purchase, was of a highly disquieting nature. Fenton, therefore, held his tongue about the affair, denied any knowledge of Mr. Arrowsmith, who had palpably made an unwarrantable use of a respectable address; and when Slim Jim ventured round for instructions, told him to hold his jaw and keep from chattering. Slim Jim not having paid up the price of the Vaults, took the hint gladly, and ran that delectable enterprise for his own profit with great skill and address; while Fenton, having found the keys of the little cottage, established his wife's mother and his own son there, and used it for a week-end family resort. The butler at Portland Place, also badly frightened, broke off all relations with the group.

"And I'm that thankful," said poor long-suffering Mrs.

Fenton, "to be rid of all they rascals; and Fenton he have a proper fright, and now living most respectable. And their lordships say, Couldn't be better look after, not in Buckingham Palace. He *have* got a style about him, Fenton have, and no mistake about it, and behave like a Dook, when he feel inclined."

When Rookwood broke the news of his engagement to his uncle, there was trouble indeed. The old man was terribly upset. Rookwood made no secret of the drawbacks —a convict for a father and a drunkard and worse for a mother. It made the proud old man wring his hands in misery.

"An ex-convict," he repeated. "For the Rookwoods of Bloor! Oh, my lad, can you do such a thing as that? What would your father have felt?"

"I know," said Anthony, miserably. "It is worse for me than for you."

Old Mr. Rookwood looked at him pathetically. He could see the change in him.

"My dear lad, you are all I have in the world. Your father and I watched you grow, and join the business, and earn the respect of all men, with such pride, such pride . . . Is this worth it, this thing you have set your heart on . . . this girl . . . ?" And then, as Anthony did not answer,

"Could she not find someone else!" with great bitterness.

The suggestion was not intended seriously; nevertheless it hurt Anthony more than a little. Maisie's love for him was a dubious point; did she or did she not care for him, was the question he asked himself day and night.

It did not look as if she did care very much, since she did not even trouble to write! She plainly did not mind about making him unhappy. Was it indeed worth while to inflict so much distress on his people as this marriage would do, for a girl who cared so little for him?

He went from his uncle's presence in a rather wretched frame of mind; leaving his uncle equally wretched, devising methods of appeal to Maisie, whereby she would be persuaded to release Anthony from her thrall.

It was on this situation that Maisie's telegram, summoning him to her side, supervened. Anthony wrung an unwilling term of leave from his uncle, and hurried, half-hoping, half-fearing, to the summons.

The episode of her husband's visit, no matter how deplorable and undignified it had seemed to Maisie and to Miss Stutchberry, had given Mrs. Stutchberry unmitigated pleasure; she lived and died in the unshaken conviction that James was good at heart and that his worst enemy was the weakness which made him "drift" at the mercy of evil counsel and temptations.

"Isn't it pathetic!" exclaimed Mrs. Macleod. "It is only those kinds of scoundrels who get that kind of devotion; the good men *never* get it!" And Maisie felt guilty.

For beyond all doubt, her man was "good." If he were not brazen enough, self-assertive enough, for her taste, was it not that she had acquired perverted tastes in a corrupt school? She did not know if Rookwood would ever rouse in her the passionate emotion Sefton had been able to evoke. It made her desperate to think of it. Had it been a casting of pearls before swine; or were those feelings in themselves swinish and only accorded in response to swinish invitations? She knew too little of the great problem of love to be able to judge.

She and Rookwood were on friendly familiar terms, inclined to laugh at the same jokes and enjoy the same pleasures. She almost succeeded in dispelling his sense of grievance at her treatment of him; and told him also, that she had felt obliged to test in some way her own feeling for him.

"It is not a nice thing for you to marry the daughter of

such people as my parents," she said gravely. "And if I do not care for you enough—if I cannot give you all you ought to be sure of, I should be doing you a great wrong to marry you."

Rookwood wished his uncle could have heard that speech.

"And do you care enough?" he asked, gruffly and awkwardly.

"I do not know. Will you wait a little longer? There is a great deal I want to tell you, but I cannot do it until I know more about you—the real you, I mean, the you inside you; and sometimes when one wants to say things, they won't come."

How well Rookwood knew that!

"You will wait a little, Anthony? That is, if you think I am worth waiting for!"

"I would wait eternity for you," he declared.

"I am afraid you would find me a little faded!"

Rookwood laughed, but fell in with her wishes; and it was some weeks later that Maisie opened her mind to him.

"Do you remember, Anthony," she said, after a rather lengthy pause, "how we got engaged?"

They were in the cosy room where Maisie had lain on her stomach on the rug before the fire with her feet kicked up behind her, devouring the works of fiction that had so coloured her life. Her engagement ring shone in the firelight.

"I remember!" responded Rookwood. "I am not likely to forget. If you knew the devices that whirled about in my brain to manœuvre it into a real engagement, instead of a sham one that I agreed to merely to get you back safely, you would be surprised. I never knew before I was so cunning and tricky."

"*You* went into it because you wanted to," began Maisie, searching for words to frame her meaning. "*I*

was scared into it. I don't mean I did not like the idea, but I was given no choice; and I thought anyway I should be safe with you. I . . . I wanted you to make love to me, always. But I hated your being so humble and always being afraid of offending me; and then believing me guilty . . . Oh, that spoilt everything."

She stopped, and he felt a recurrence of all the old regret.

"And then something happened—there is a great deal I have never told you; and I must tell you now. I have always wanted to tell you. You were willing to marry me when you thought me a criminal; and I suppose you will always want to; but you will not like what I am going to tell you. There is a man that I would have gone to the ends of the world for . . . He was older than my father, grey-haired, an ex-convict, as bad a man, almost, as my father, only not so cruel; and I knew all that about him and believed him capable of almost any wickedness; and yet . . . I could not resist him. He had only to speak to me, or to touch me, and it all came back. I was helpless, in a sort of way; and he knew it. I held him off to a certain extent, I hated caring for him, I defied him and told him what sort of man I knew he was; and yet I was always wanting him and missing him . . . Often when I was with you, I would remember him, and then nothing else seemed to matter . . . it killed everything else; it made everything else seem tame, and—and—pale, somehow. I know this is hurting you, but it must be told.

"He was the man who was my mother's partner, and I heard them discussing how he had made love to me just so as to keep me from making fusses. He told her she was a fool to suppose he would do me any harm . . . I was much safer with him than anyone else . . . He tried to make me believe that he had told her that just to keep her quiet . . . Then I found out he was living with my

mother's friend . . . had been all the time; she said he was her husband . . .

"Yet he would not let them be nasty to me, and he tried to make me promise not to go to my father . . . And when I left them, it all began over again—his hold over me. I was most wretched. And he gave me the address of a woman who he said would always look after me for his sake if I were in real trouble. The address was this one; Mrs. Stutchberry's.

"I came here when I felt so worried about marrying you while I kept thinking of him, and you were too silly to do anything to keep me thinking of you. I gave the note to Mrs. Stutchberry, and told her about this man; and it turns out that he was her husband."

Rookwood had got hold of himself by this time. His own pain was swallowed up in the thought of the crucifixion this girl had gone through—so young and helpless, so inexperienced.

This was the man she had kissed so tearfully, at the Gare St. Lazare.

She was sitting beside his knee, on a stool; and his head was leaning on one hand, the elbow propped on his knee. As he watched her face, sideways, he wondered what had given this young thing strength to swim against such a tide. He put an arm protectingly round her shoulders, and was comforted when she edged a little nearer and leant against him.

"It was the shock, and sorrow, that broke her down and brought her to the state she is in. Practically, I did it. I could not help it; I could not know; but I did it. And I felt I ought to do something to make it good. She craved to see him; and I knew he would come if I asked him . . . I wrote to him; and he came.

"I wanted to see him and I dreaded to see him. It seemed so shameful, and so indecent—Mrs. Stutchberry's husband, that *old* woman. In the end he forced me to

see him, and hinted that he was glad she was dying and that then we could be married. . . . He looked so old, and so wicked, all of a sudden; and it was so sly and so vile—and oh! so *horrible;* that he seemed to me to be quite a different man. All in a minute he became Mr. Stutchberry, not Jim Sefton. Now it all seems as if it could not have been true; but still there is something that troubles me . . . "

She hesitated and broke off.

"Well?"

For the life of him he could not help his voice being hoarse and harsh.

That helped her to go on. What she dreaded was excessive patience and gentleness. There was no need to treat her as a frail broken thing; she could stand up for herself all right. She was glad he sounded angry.

"One thing is, that I feel so unable to trust myself. I have no judgment about people in my likings; and it is the same about loving a man like that. I don't feel I deserve to be trusted. I knew it was all wrong and horrible; and all the nice people in books, when they find the false lover is a married man . . . well, you see what people think of that sort of thing, even if those books are not very natural. I couldn't shake it off; and I couldn't keep away from it; I feel disgraced; oh! I feel horrible. I'm not fit, really, for you to marry. How do I know it might not happen again? Well, it couldn't, exactly; not in that way; but I feel unsafe."

"Is there any more of it?"

"Yes. I don't think—at least I don't know—that I could ever feel just that way about any other man . . . ever again . . . and I wonder . . . I want you to help me, here; I don't want you to pity me, or treat me like a hurt child; I want you to tell me what things are, out of your experience—all my experience has been with bad people —tell me whether it is only bad men who can make one

feel like that; make one feel that one would go to the devil for them and not care what happened if only one could see them and touch them. Is it bad, to feel like that? To feel dizzy and carried away just at a touch . . . I want to know if I could feel like that, for a good man, and be good and natural—normal—myself. Do you understand me? Can you tell me? . . . I can never say it again, or talk of it again, but I had to say it. It is such a relief, such an escape, to have thrown it all off; but I don't want *your* life all made wrong . . . Oh! I don't believe you understand a bit."

"I believe I do, though," said Rookwood, with a forced laugh. "Don't you worry about nature, Maisie. She can look after herself. People feel the same about good people or bad—it makes very little difference! If it is any consolation to you to know, when I thought you had helped in that plot, I felt that way about you—just what you have described; but then I felt the same before I thought you had done it; and after—now—all the time. That may be some revenge for you for my unpardonable offence of doubting you."

She did not know if he were in jest or earnest, angry or only sore.

"Do you still really want me to marry you?" she asked, slowly and doubtfully.

"Yes. Do you want to marry me?"

A nod.

"Then take the consequences," he whispered, catching her to him.

CHAPTER XXXII

MAISIE'S MARRIAGE

THE wedding took place quite quietly a fortnight after Maisie's talk with Rookwood. Maisie helped to make her own marriage feast—to show off her domestic accomplishments, Mrs. Macleod said. Nellie Trent, that lady's niece, was the only bridesmaid, and Mrs. Macleod and Anthony's bank-manager uncle, the only guests. Miss Stutchberry gave the bride away; and after the "breakfast," which was really lunch, Maisie took her last farewell of Mrs. Stutchberry, who was appreciably nearer the end.

Mrs. Stutchberry liked Rookwood and enjoyed the little bit of romance. It helped to pass away the blank days after Sefton left. She remained in blissful ignorance of the reason for his hurried departure; and took a genuine interest in all questions relating to the trousseau. Some old treasures of lace and brocade were unearthed from drawers reeking of camphor; and some pink and yellow topazes, that only wanted resetting to be very fascinating, were recovered from quaint carved sandal-wood boxes and bestowed on the grateful Maisie.

The honeymoon was to be a somewhat novel one, for it was to be spent in their own home, which was a wedding present from old Mr. Rookwood.

"We can do the travelling afterwards," said Rookwood.

Maisie was wildly excited at the idea of the home—which, of course, she had not seen. It was to be a surprise; and Mrs. Fenton was getting it into order for her lamb.

"I have never had a home, just think!" she cried. "This is all the home I have ever had—the dear old books and the playground, and my hearthrug where I used to read. I was a lucky girl to have it, all other things considered. But now, a home of my very own!"

Her farewell to the Stutchberrys and Mrs. Macleod was grateful and tearful but excited. Adventures were crowding in on her; the greatest adventure of all, after all the minor ones—a home, a husband, being married. No one could say her career had not been romantic; "and now I am going to be a British Matron, respectable—yes, Anthony, *respectable!* What a change. That seems the very wildest adventure possible."

"I hope you won't make a mess of it and disgrace me," remarked Anthony. "Being respectable is quite an art—however, you will have *me* to copy. You can't go wrong if you do that."

The house had belonged to Rookwoods of the past, and was in Old Queen Street, a stone's throw from Cockpit Steps. There was a mellow, inviting look to its outside, and within the open door was Mrs. Fenton's beaming face and ecstatic welcome. Tea was the first rite to be observed; tea with the soda-cakes of Mrs. Fenton's fame. It was served in a little room between floors that almost made Maisie weep with rapture.

Treasures of dead-and-gone Rookwoods, stored in cellar and cupboard and storeroom out of sight of successive sets of tenants—treasures of china and ivory and brass, of silver and crystal and lace, of embossed hangings and embroidered tapestries and scarves encrusted with gold, of jewelled weapons and inlaid chests and carven ivories—had been unearthed by the decorators and set about to infinite advantage. The panelled rooms had tall narrow windows with deep recesses; the fireplaces had recesses each side, some wide, some tall and narrow like the win-

dows, some arched and curved and concave. Book-cases built into walls, corners where seats nestled invitingly, friezes cunningly contrived with shelves, painted panels of stately ancestors, polished floors of a darkness and shininess most exquisite—and at times treacherous—wide, shallow, slippery stairs, with odd passages and subsidiary stairs darting off at unexpected angles; small irregular-shaped rooms where rooms seemed least likely to be found; and books everywhere—musty old books, stately magnificent tomes, modern books, new books brightly bound, all manner of books—Maisie's home, her first home, was a place of many delights. By the time she had come back to where she started from—the beautiful hall with the great tiger-skin rug—she had exhausted all terms of admiration and pleasure, and tiptoed along in speechless joy.

"And this is my Home," she breathed, rapturously.

"Yes," drawled Rookwood. "I believe so. It isn't a bad one to begin with, is it?"

"To begin with!" sighed Maisie, clasping her hands round his arm and leaning her head against him, while Mrs. Fenton dried some of her never-failing tears; "I never want to go on to any other. I wouldn't change this for Buckingham Palace and Balmoral and the Kremlin rolled in one. I shall never want to step outside of it—except for the pleasure of coming back 'home.' You need never expect me to travel, Anthony. I warn you fairly, nothing will induce me to move."

"Contumacious person! Well, Mrs. Fenton, we are vastly obliged to you for all your trouble, and the results are past praise. Thank you ever so much; and I hope you will always feel there is a welcome here for an old and kind friend, to whom we both owe our happiness."

Maisie kissed the good woman and was blessed and loved and lambed; and then the newly married couple for the first time in good earnest began to take stock of

each other. Rookwood wondered if the platonic relations Maisie had adroitly managed to establish were to be maintained; and Maisie began to wonder what kind of a person he would be to be left alone with.

The quaint little room where tea had been served was her refuge. Here, she said, she would make her "den." The odds and ends pertaining to her former life were installed among the household gods, and she made herself unnecessarily busy, while Rookwood slipped away and investigated the resources of the cellar. She had dressed for dinner and gone back to the little room before he came up to change.

It was there he came to look for her. She was crouched low before the dying fire in the semi-darkness; and rose as he opened the door and stood within it with the light behind him. Then it came upon her with a wave of realization, that she was married; and that this man, her husband, was a more vital fact in her existence than the lovely home in which she was exulting. This man, her husband, could make that home a hell or a heaven. Involuntarily, she shrank a little.

"Maisie?"

How his voice sounded . . . was it threatening, or cross, or cajoling? or was it only shy? She remembered, and there was a dawning smile, that she had thought him shy. He could not be more so than she was!

The door closed behind him, shutting out all but the firelight.

He stood beside her, warm and big, his hand seeking hers, and for a moment she felt her old anger at him for not kissing her and "saving her trouble." The next instant he held her close and kissed her as he had done the evening she had made up her mind he was bad and treacherous.

Silently she returned his kisses, her lips trembling a little; and one swift glance she gave him, hoping to catch

the blue glint of his eyes—eyes which had somehow become precious . . . oh, so infinitely precious. Her home was going to be heaven, with this big dear man who could love her so and yet be *good*.

"Miss Stutchberry said all you wanted was a master," he murmured, teasingly.

"Miss Stutchberry!" retorted Maisie, "she doesn't know. It isn't a master; it is someone who takes charge and . . . and saves trouble. You don't know what a trouble you have been."

CHAPTER XXXIII

AFTERWARDS

THREE small bodies, conspicuously dressed, respectively, in the brightest scarlet, emerald green, and buttercup yellow, propelled themselves over the ground with the utmost velocity compatible with the shortness and fatness of their legs. Arriving at their objective, they hurled themselves violently at the skirt and trousers of a fashionable couple who stopped and poised themselves to receive the impact. The assault was accompanied by shrill cries and whoops of triumph, as scarlet won by a head and shoulders and plunged to a fall, neatly fielded by the owner of the trousers.

"Me first!" yelled scarlet; and was forthwith overtaken by and entangled with emerald and buttercup to a chorus of incoherent shrillness.

Maisie laughed her low sweet chuckle, as she saved her skirt from complete ruin at the hands of the twins.

"Aren't they darlings!" she cried, to Anthony. "Come on, sweets, make haste home. Robin has come and he is ever so hungry. Where is Babs?"

The chattering shrill voices explained the position of Babs, left behind with nurse and now appearing calm and unflustered in charge of that functionary and the perambulator. Babs was in pure white, and was of the female sex. Scarlet was also of that persuasion. The twins and Robin were male persons.

They clattered and chattered and jostled each other along to the exit from the Park, and up Cockpit Steps—as happy and charming a group as one could find in all England. They did not see—or seeing, did not heed—the

wolfish hungry eyes of a lean grey man watching them at a little distance. Watching and following. When the perambulator came to the steps, he came forward with an "allow me;" and helped it on its way, saying as he did so to the nurse, "Are these Mrs. Anthony Rookwood's children?"

Something in the tone made her pause to look at him. She said afterwards that the face of him turned her cold. For an instant she stood there irresolute, the man beside her; and then Maisie and Anthony turned to see whether she wanted help up the steps. Maisie's eyes looked straight into Jim Sefton's. He turned abruptly and went back down the steps, walking swiftly and steadily away.

Maisie gave a little exclamation, and stood still. She seemed rooted to where she stood. And when Anthony, in some concern hurried her into the house, a fit of shuddering took her. In the little room she still called her den she clung to Anthony in a passion of distress.

"Did you see that man? Did you see that man? Oh, Anthony, that was him. That was Jim Sefton."

Shaken with a savage anger that this man should still have power to move her, after all these years, Anthony said nothing. He could only hold her close, and let her hold him.

"He looked . . . he looked so . . . so *wretched,*" she gasped. "He looked as if he had . . . as if . . . just as if he had *seen* Despair, and had given up . . . Ought I to have spoken to him, Anthony? I didn't feel I could."

"*No!*" said Anthony, low and emphatic.

"I couldn't; but I wish I had had the courage. He looked as if he might . . . kill himself."

"Nonsense, Maisie dear. Don't talk like that. You are working yourself up into a state about something you know nothing about. Don't let the horrors of the past run away with your imagination now. Come, dear girl; the youngsters will be ravenous."

How it hurt him, to see that she was so shaken!

In the dining-room was Robin, the first-born, and the little girl in scarlet, called Rachel, after Mrs. Stutchberry. She was a real Rookwood, blue eyes and black hair, dead white skin and wide scarlet mouth. She might have been of an alien race from her fair, bright mother, for there was no one point of resemblance. Robin, on the other hand, bore a likeness of a sinister description; and neither parent ever alluded to it, though it lay heavy on the consciousness of both. The cresting hair and straight slim build, the quick light tread and flexible fine fingers, the narrow chin, small head and clean-cut features; it was Dick Pleydell from head to heels. Small boy though he was, his manners were as unaffectedly pleasant as his movements were graceful; and there was an insinuating charm about him that everyone succumbed to, from his father and mother to the servants of all degrees. Old Mr. Rookwood adored him.

His pretty laugh was ringing in the room as Maisie entered—a laugh so like her own, but so much more like that other, it struck Maisie afresh, and with terror. The encounter outside had utterly unnerved her. The sight of her little son, using his knife and fork and napkin with those dextrous fingers, and playing a little tattoo on the table, gave her a sensation of horror. Could this dear little lad of hers, with his sweet, coaxing ways, ever grow up like those two men the thought of whom never ceased to recall memories from which she shrank ever more and more?

She would not go out that afternoon, and Anthony stayed with her.

"You took a dreadful risk when you married me," she sighed.

When he pressed for her meaning, she spoke of Robin and the likeness to her father, for the first time.

"Sometimes I can't bear it," she whispered. "I can't

bear to think of what it may mean. You know, Anthony, that Fenton always calls him 'Master Dickie.' "

All his efforts could not soothe her. The unruffled calm of years was broken and clouded by the sudden appearance of this ghost from the past. The haggard despair of Sefton's face came back to her in her sleep, and held her thoughts when awake.

"I am afraid!" she kept saying. "I am afraid. Suppose he did you some harm . . . "

Sunday was a troubled day, but towards evening she had recovered something of her balance.

On Monday, the morning paper told of the body of an unknown man, found in St. James' Park water. It did not need the description to make Maisie's heart sink.

Nothing Anthony could say would deter her from going to see and identify the dead man.

"I owe him that much," she maintained.

James Stutchberry, gambler, ex-convict, suicide, in the mortuary, lay in the dignity of death. The passionless calm of the lifeless face, remote, final, unheeding, brought a storm of tears.

"He looks as if he might have been *good!*" she sobbed.

No one else had as yet identified the body; and Maisie gave the necessary evidence.

There were no surviving relations but the sister who had laid her curse on him.

He was buried beside the faithful wife who had died because of his ill-doing; and Miss Stutchberry lays flowers on both graves at stated intervals.

The Hôtel Bienfait was also informed of the tragedy. Lola acknowledged Maisie's letter; and said: "I have no one left to care for, or to stand by me. I live in perpetual fear of your father—the wickedest man I have ever known. It was you who sent him here, and it was you who took Jim from me, and you are the cause of his

death. I will never forgive you, and I curse you every day I live."

Maisie gave little shuddering cries as she read the letter. The fate of a woman, alone, living in dread of Pleydell in his immediate neighbourhood, was one that struck her as appalling. It was long before she recovered her shaken calm.

She still watches her son Robin, and wonders whether the likeness to "Master Dickie" is only skin deep, or whether it is a surface reflection of fundamental characteristics. She has not yet found any sinister tendencies. The likeness does not exist in the other children, although the little white-clad baby girl had Pleydell hair and eyes. And in all their travels and jaunts, she has never let Anthony lure her to Paris. Once, however, they went to Mont Roselle to meet Mrs. Macleod, and had coffee in the garden with the *tonnelle* and the *jet d'eau,* with Rosalie and her *gros François;* and heard from the worthy couple, in the raciest possible language, how *le papa Rouxel* was taken in by a bogus Russian prince, accepting, and passing, a large number of forged notes.

"Il les a gobé, le papa Rouxel, sans y faire attention. C'est l'i qui a eu des affaires! Vous ne vous figurez pas . . . mais c'qu'on a rit! L'i qui s'disait si malin; et on l'i a donné ça comme du pain bénit. Mon Dieu, c'qu'on en a rit!"

And because the Russian prince was never caught, the police were censured; and the *sous-préfet en voulait* to his brother-in-law, and got the hotel into trouble; and *le papa Rouxel est parti. On ne mange plus les fortunes a l'Hôtel de Côte ces jours-ci. C'est propre et bien tenu, aller, a' l'heure de maintenant, que le papa Rouxel y est p'u.*

"It isn't so awfully successful, after all, to be wicked," remarked Maisie reflectively, on the way home. "The only object in being wicked is to be successful and to get

ahead of the good people; but it does not seem to work out right."

"It pays best to be worthy," said Mrs. Macleod. "It may be dull; but it is safe."

"And when you manage to pull it off like I do," observed Anthony, "by being both worthy and wealthy, besides being beautiful and beloved——"

He leapt aside, leaving his psalm unsung, to avoid an onslaught with Maisie's sunshade.

"If you talk like that, I'll get a separation on the plea of your causing me acute mental anguish. Besides, you are getting fat. If that is the result of being worthy and wealthy, you will very soon find yourself neither beautiful nor beloved."

"It is no use arguing with women," asserted Anthony; "and anyway, I shan't try. I only wish to say that if you want to be wicked——"

"We don't," retorted Maisie, interrupting. "I married you because I thought you were good. Being good myself, I didn't want to throw myself away on a bad man."

"And you haven't," replied Anthony. "I am entirely worthy of the best woman that ever lived—that is my wife; and she should thank Heaven fasting for a good man's love."

And as they were still in the street, adequate chastisement was impossible.

THE END

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